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The
highwayman
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ANNIE J. FALLOW

THE HIGHWAYMAN



AN ANGEL!" SHE WHISPERED BENEATH HER BREATH. "AN ANGEL!"



THE HIGHWAY- MAN

by GUY
RAWLENCE
Illustrations by
WILL GREFE
NEW YORK
W. J. WATT & COMPANY

PUBLISHERS





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**TO
MY MOTHER**

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THE HIGHWAYMAN

CHAPTER I

SIR MICHAEL IS PRESENTED

A BLUFF, blustering wind under a blue sky rushed over London; a wind wild with the life of Spring — earth's vital season — yet a trifle chill, in spite of the sun and though May was on the tiptoe of departure. On the morrow June would be here and, for that fact, it seemed that Spring was whirling the last measures of her dance keenly and impetuously, as if she feared forgetfulness when Summer was once again with the world. So she drove flocks of white clouds fast across the blue, raised flurries of dust in London streets, and breathed a breath of March into the air; protests — to be treasured as souvenirs — of her going.

The day, then, was the 31st of May; and Farmer George was reigning.

From a window of his rooms in King Street, St. James's — the second house from the corner on the northern side — Sir Michael Stanton, Bart., of Stanton Hall, Devon, was surveying his immediate world; an occupation, at this moderately early hour of the morning, apt to be unenlivening. Wrapped in a crimson dressing-gown, with a wood fire burning bravely in the grate behind him, and the steam of hot chocolate — which he preferred to Nantsay cognac — in his nostrils,

it was difficult to realise that without there was a chill in the air, a tang almost of winter. Yet the chairmen, on their stand near the Palace, were rubbing their hands together as if February were still with them — but, then, they were in the shadow, with the wind rushing at them through a gully of masonry, while here the sunlight poured straight into the windows. A clock tinkling ten notes from the mantelpiece, and the church of St. James's booming the same number, sent his thoughts to the time, and called to his mind the fact — from which, for the moment, it had strangely enough escaped — that, within an hour and a half, he must be at Dean Street, Soho, to pay his respects to Mademoiselle Clothilde Chamby — the little Mademoiselle who so soon was to be his wife and the new Lady Stanton. With her name as quarry it is not, perhaps, to be considered a miracle that his thoughts raced away in pursuit, and that the chocolate continued to send its odor — its very soul — into the air, unheeded.

But presently, his thoughts running too fast, or, perhaps, too slow for his pleasure, and the sunlight dazzling his eyes, Sir Michael turned back into the room, pulled an arm-chair to the table and began to sip from the slighted cup.

Imagine, if you please, a tall, fine young man, broad in the shoulder, slim in the leg, but well calved, with muscular hands of a fair size, and a fine-shaped head set on a good-shaped neck. In feature, I should call him handsome, certainly, but no Adonis; yet, of that, you may judge for yourself. The nose was straight and excellently cut, with even nostrils, not too thin to be critical; the mouth well formed, but a trifle beyond the size to be called perfect, yet one that I should call a pleasing mouth; his chin was pointed and firm, and

he possessed a custom of thrusting it forward on occasion like a hound on scent; a forehead medium in breadth and height. To end my catalogue, let me say that his eyes were blue and fearless with often a smile in them, but, more often, perhaps, a look that seemed to show that their owner had seen some deal of the world—even too much of it; that he was, indeed, a little world-weary and was just realising the fact.

On this morning of May, beneath the crimson gown, he wore a pair of smalls and silk stockings, his feet were thrust into slippers of scarlet leather, and his head into a night-cap. Indeed, as regards attire, he was like many gentlemen of fashion at ten o'clock in the morning—only, maybe, more advanced with his toilette than most, and, unlike many, already out of his bed. At any rate he appeared a very elegant, trifle *blasé*, good-looking young man of the world; one who could fight or dance, hate—if he took the trouble—or love; gamble, drink, dice, as they all did in those days, but with a charmingly detached manner rather rare and refreshing. As a friend he would be sure, as a foe implacable, as a lover—once his passions were really stirred—eternally faithful. His indiscretions would be from carelessness rather than weakness; his strength would be natural. He was, in fine, a gay gentleman of twenty-seven—unfortunate enough to be born heir to a baronetcy and a considerable estate—who up to now had lived in, and liked, the world—I mean the circumscribed world of “Society”—but who now had stirrings of thoughts within him that the life of the world was mighty near being void and baseless—a pleasing mask that hid the true flesh, the true life; sham lips, sham cheeks that covered, surely, something of actuality. He was well on the verge of such thoughts;

one more shock or disillusionment would make him heart-sick of the mask, eager for the true face beneath. He vaguely knew this, but what he had no suspicion of was the fact that the mask was so soon to be torn aside willy-nilly — a painful thing in the doing whatever the result.

At his side, as he sipped the chocolate, lay folded the news-sheet still damp from the press, but he did not trouble to open it; his thoughts were, as you may suspect, with little Clothilde Chamby. What was the news of London to him, when London held her?

During a week the lovers had been separated, for seven days he had not seen her — parted by seven leagues. Mademoiselle and her aunt had been visiting the Dowager Lady Fortington at my Lord Fortington's mansion in Surrey. At the recurrence of this thought — though a pretty frequent one — Michael could not withstand the will to smile. The reason of it was this:

The appearance of Clothilde Chamby on the horizon of Society had been sudden and it had been prophesied that her departure would be as precipitate — but of that I have nothing to say. To the world, she gave little of her parentage but in speaking of ancestors — a subject which both she and her aunt avoided as much as possible — one heard principally of a certain Duc de Rocenego, a gentleman of the Court of Louis XIV. He, it appeared, belonged to her father's side of the family, and was but hinted at vaguely. By this, it may be gathered that her grandfather on the paternal side, was an Italian noble and, as far as any one knew, an illustrious gentleman. But apart from his name the world knew nothing; Michael, however, had learned considerably more from the little lady's aunt one even-

ing when she had taken a glass of sillery beyond her customary allowance.

Her mother's father, it seemed, had been a notary at Versailles; a strange old man to whom, his wife dying young, was left the care of two daughters, both of whom — after a due lapse of years — had wedded. Maria, by ten years the elder, had married Mr. Howard — a merchant of London, who had come much to Paris on business — while the younger had been captured by a Monsieur Chamby — the descendant of Italian nobles, in spite of a name certainly Gallic — and a gentleman of wit and cunning, but of small fortune. The former marriage — as Mrs. Howard testified — had been a success in a dull way; the latter — as was to be expected — had proved a failure. Within two years Monsieur Chamby had spent her fortune by drowning his wit in drink, and had shot himself at Brussels; whence his wife was forced to return, with the baby Clothilde, to the notary at Versailles. That was some time since, in the days of the Roi Soleil, and we must skip nearly twenty uneventful years, and come to things more recent. Six months ago three deaths had occurred — within a dozen days of each other — in the family of Mademoiselle Clothilde. Her grandfather, her mother and her uncle, Mr. Howard, had all left this uncertain world — for one, perhaps, still more uncertain — as if of arranged accord. A droll event; but, having occurred, it was only natural that Mrs. Howard should cross to France — which she did much to her discomfort on a November day — seize Clothilde from the naughty surroundings of Versailles — for she had, you must know, inbibed some of the late Mr. Howard's British horror of her natal country — and whisk her back to England.

It was on the voyage from Calais — this time, thank Heaven, a fair one — that the couple had encountered young Lord Fortington, just returning, with his tutor, from the Grand Tour. The young gentleman, it seemed, falling a victim to Mademoiselle's *beaux yeux* and pretty French tricks, had got into conversation, made himself vastly agreeable, invited them to dine with him at Dover, and vowed that, in spite of his tutor's protests — who was more careful of this sort of thing in England than he had been on the continent — he wished to see them in London. To which protestation Mrs. Howard, all smiles, gave her sanction, and journeyed to town thinking herself a remarkably clever woman. If she was scarcely that, she was certainly a lucky one, for Mr. Howard had left her the considerable fortune which he had accumulated by much diligence and parsimony. (Of the fortune she spoke frequently to Sir Michael; a few other things he guessed for himself.)

Next, after a becoming lapse of six months — when, in fact, she could decently discard black for a discreet mauve or gray — Mrs. Howard installed herself in a comfortable, if not spacious, house in the near neighborhood of Soho Square, and set herself to await events. Then, when she had scarcely settled herself in her new abode, Lord Fortington — who meanwhile had by no means forgotten the pert miss with the onyx eyes — inveigled his mamma, the Dowager, into visiting Mrs. Howard, and inviting her and the niece to a drum at Fortington House, Grosvenor Square. Things had gone apace after that!

Within a month Mrs. Howard and Mademoiselle Chamby found themselves invited and received at numerous houses, and there was even talk — behind the fans,

be it said — of Clothilde going to Court. In the midst of this turmoil of excitement, when all the bucks in town were flirting with Mademoiselle, and Mrs. Howard's hopes were soaring high — a Duke had kissed her hand, and, by consequence, she thought the world was at her feet — little Lord Fortington had gone out of the running by falling a prey to the measles, and was forced to retire to Surrey, with a crimson face; there to be nursed and cosseted by his mamma. Into the breach — for Lord Fortington was the only avowed wooer — Sir Michael had stepped, having, like many another, fallen victim to little Chamby's charms; all through the breezy days of March he had wooed her and, on All Fool's Day, Mrs. Howard — the Duke having gone to Tunbridge and no other husband forthcoming — had permitted the betrothal.

Having been thus infatuated during a period of two months Michael had fancied himself in the throes of a great passion; and, a week since, when Mrs. Howard had announced that Lord Fortington — after a very protracted illness, poor fellow — was in a state of able-bodied convalescence, and that the Dowager had written to invite them to her place in Surrey — Sir Michael had worked himself into a positive fit of jealousy. The first night after their departure he had lain awake, entirely without sleep; the second, he drank deep; the third, he slept like a kitten; and now, on the eighth morning, he could smile at the thought of the old Dowager entertaining Mrs. Howard and her black-eyed niece.

Do not, however, think from this that Sir Michael — who was, on the whole, an earnest young man — had begun to repent of his affections; nothing of the sort — as yet. Separation had only allowed him time

partially to lift the rosy veil of Love which, to his eyes, enveloped Clothilde, and permit him to perceive her a little more plainly; and what he had seen did not shock him; did not even ruffle his emotions. A man who thinks himself in love, however ephemeral the passion may be, never discovers the defects of his mistress — or if he does, ignores them — until one sudden clashing moment. Up to now, the trifles he had discovered merely amused him.

He perceived that Mademoiselle, though well-mannered, was a little — what shall I say? — *bourgeoise*; he saw that, perhaps, she was too much of a coquette, used her eyes too freely for a docile wife. Again he realised — which he had not before — that Mrs. Howard was nothing but the flaunting widow of a City merchant with all the natural polish of her French birth rubbed off by residence on Tower Hill and amid much chat of the 'Change.

All these things, and more, a week's separation had taught him, yet they did not alter his affection — only told him plainly some facts concerning the object of that affection. Clothilde might not be the true *grande dame*, but she was French and possessed pretty ways; she might, indeed, use her eyes too freely, but they were good eyes; and, after all, when they were married she would be more or less under his control. As to Mrs. Howard — well, he was not going to marry Mrs. Howard, thank Heaven!

Such thoughts brought contentment to Sir Michael; he was now no longer actively jealous, no longer sleepless, it was unnecessary to drink deep to drown the sorrow of a week's separation; but although, perhaps, the red heat of passion was fading, it was still pleasantly warm. And with that pleasant glow had come the

thought — O blind youth! — that he could train Clothilde to be an excellent wife, with whom he could, when he so willed it, retire to Devon, and there lead a placid existence. The great world — which, by-the-bye, he had known in Paris, Berlin, Rome and a dozen other cities beside London — was beginning to appear to him more and more vapid and hollow; indeed, far more than he at present guessed, was he prepared for a life of pastoral peace; willing to live in a real pastoral — not the silk and satin mockery of Watteau.

With this whirl of thoughts — a whirl in which he had lived for nigh a week — Sir Michael drank his chocolate before the fire, heedless of time. Then the remembrance of his visit to Soho Square made him ejaculate: “Dear little minx,” and glance hurriedly at the clock. A look of surprise spread over his features.

“Egad,” he cried, and rang the bell for his man; his thoughts switched off to perukes, ruffles, waistcoats and a posy of flowers.

But here we will leave him to his toilette.

CHAPTER II

THE LADY OF THE ONYX EYES

AT half-past eleven — or, rather, two minutes after that hour to be precise — Sir Michael arrived in a chair at No. 10 Dean Street, Soho. Faultlessly clad, our hero appeared quite an exquisite as he mounted the steps and rapped on the door; in his hand he carried a posy of yellow roses, which went well with the amber brocade of his coat, his cinnamon breeches, the gold knob of his cane and the *point d'Espagne* on his hat.

“Show me to Mademoiselle Chamby,” said he to the little negro page who, with eyes all a-goggle, flung open the door. (It was, let me remind you, the fashion to have these small monsters to wait on one; hence, though Mrs. Howard squirmed at the sight of every Sambo in town, Clothilde had insisted upon a Blackamoor.)

At Sir Michael's command Sambo stared; he was not “sartain” if Mademoiselle would see him.

Michael's eyebrows lifted.

“Go and enquire then,” said he.

Sambo grinned, bowed, and ran up the staircase like a black rabbit, leaving Sir Michael to cool his impatience in the hall. He was glad that there were no powdered flunkies to stare politely at him, for a man always considers that he looks somewhat of a fool when he holds a bunch of flowers in front of him.

Neither within nor without was No. 10 an imposing abode; the exterior one would call respectable, the

interior elegant in a meretricious way, with a quantity of gilding — after the French manner — and a deal of cheap brocade. It was all too new, too glaringly new — one could even scent the varnish and paint at odd corners.

“I am solly sar, but Mam’m cannot see you dis morning —”

So Sambo, just descended.

“Not see me! Is she unwell?” Michael was in a fume; after a week’s absence and to be refused! “Tell her that I must see her, that it is — er — important. That I want to see her.”

“But, sar —”

“Do as you are bid, little imp or —” began Michael, but said no more — Sambo was already out of sight. He was accustomed to the pets and tirades of Mrs. Howard and Mademoiselle, but before the wrath of a man he quailed.

Sir Michael turned to an oval gilt mirror that hung on the wall and surveyed himself; and, somewhat to his surprise, he discerned that there was anxiety in his eyes, his lips were tight shut, a wrinkle coming straight between the brows — he was, indeed, the anxious lover. Then the thought came to him that he had been too peremptory, too insistent, maybe Mademoiselle was ill, fatigued after her journey of yesterday from Surrey. Poor little soul, she was delicate, vaporish — and he had sent such a message! Angry with himself, at his reflection in the mirror, he turned away and began to stride the short length of the hall.

It was five minutes before Sambo returned, grinning hideously. Then:

“Sartainy, sartainy, if de gentleman wishes, Mam’m will see him.”

With a sigh of satisfaction Michael threw down his gloves on a *baroque* gilt table and followed the little page up-stairs; it was totally unnecessary for the black to ascend again, for Michael knew the way blindly, but Mrs. Howard — or was it Clothilde? — insisted on form. It was, therefore, with a prodigious flourish and gusto that Sambo flung open the door of Mademoiselle's boudoir.

"Sar Michael Stanton."

At the further end of a smallish room — all gold and staring blue — before a fire sat a pale little woman, a book in her thin fingers, a box of comfits at her side. The door closed, and Michael strode forward.

"Clothilde," he cried.

He had expected her to spring from the chair — as often she had done — fly to his arms; expected her to prattle some words, half English, half French after her pretty way. But in place of what he had looked for, Mademoiselle, from her brocaded chair stretched out a hand — a frail, white hand loaded with rings — and gave him an upward, passionless glance from her onyx eyes.

"*Bon jour, Monsieur,*" she lisped.

Taken aback, nonplused at this lethargic meeting — when he had expected something so different — Sir Michael drew himself back with a jerk, an exclamation of surprise strangled between his teeth. He had not heeded the outstretched hand, and it fell back on to the little woman's lap.

"*Qu'est-ce donc?*" said Mademoiselle, and, shrugging her shoulders beneath the webs of lace which veiled them, ate a sugared plum.

She was small, *piquante* perhaps, at any rate very French; her hair was black as her eyes, but powdered

now and done high, over a cushion; beneath the gray her cheeks showed pale for she used no rouge — it was interesting to be pale. She was, indeed, like an etching in black and white, for her gown was of snowy muslin with much lace and knots of black satin — a pretty gown. Around her hung a heavy perfume of musk.

For a while she stared into the fire, her foot — she had seen much play-acting — tapping on the carpet. She was about to pick up her book when Michael stirred, and began the words — the old, old words of lovers in perplexity.

“Mademoiselle,” he faltered, “I — I do not understand —”

Clothilde’s eyes shifted to him.

“*Moi non plus, I do not understand ce que Monsieur lui-même ne comprend pas,*” said she in her pretty way; a jumble of French and English words, like, as Michael had said the other day — “different beads on a string.”

“*Voulez-vous vous assoir?*”

With an imperious wave of her hand — one would have thought she was a Dido! — she motioned Michael to a stool. Then she sunk her look to the floor.

“Will Monsieur explain?” said she. “*Je suis prête d’entendre ce-que vous-avez à me dire.*”

Obediently, at a loss, Sir Michael seated himself before her; the posy dropped from his fingers — he was, I believe, glad to get rid of it — and, leaning forward, he took Clothilde’s hand in his. He was surprised that she did not resist. Her fingers lay in his grasp, passionless and chill — like little pieces of snow.

“I did not understand your conduct,” began Michael slowly, clumsily, “your message, with no reason, no explanation for denying to see me, and now —”

“And now?” flashed she.

"You are distant, petulant, unlike yourself — unlike my Clothilde."

He was arrested by an impatient movement in the chair; for a second their eyes met. Within his hand her fingers lay motionless.

"*Continuez, Monsieur,*" she said.

For a minute almost, Sir Michael was silent. What more could he say? What more add? Deep within, beyond the surprise and mortification, he was a little pettish, a little angry. He, somehow, had not expected that Mademoiselle would treat him like this, rebuff him like the — like other women. He could not quite break away from the thought that he, in some degree, was giving himself to her — making a bit of a sacrifice, though a pleasurable one. He had these ideas, I say, but do not think that Sir Michael was a prig; far from it — he had only a natural pride!

"I had expected something different," began he at last. "I had not thought to be denied after so long a separation. I —"

But again he was interrupted — this time more forcibly. Mademoiselle had snatched her fingers from his grasp and sprang to her feet — a little turmoil of black and white.

"And is it, Monsieur," she gasped, "that I should be your servant? To come when you call? *Mon Dieu*, is it that I can be alone — *jamais*? *Je ne suis pas votre poupée, votre bijou, votre* — *Je n'ai pas voulu vous voir ce matin*, but you have insist and now — *vous me grondez* and to please — *moi, votre poupée* — give me *quelques roses* — *déjà fanées*!"

With a look of scorn she touched the roses with her tiny foot. What she said was true — the heat of the

fire had ravished their freshness, the bloom of their beauty.

"You look for me to be at your will," she continued. "I am to receive at all the hours, to take your kisses — to take *vos bouquets indignes*. *Ciel!* you wish to command — my wishes are nothing."

She stood before him trembling with a frail passion. She made, I suspect, a pretty enough picture with the strong blue of the walls behind her, the despised roses, a blot of gold, at her feet, her breast heaving beneath the meshes of her bodice; those onyx eyes flashing.

Michael, too, had risen and was facing her, abashed.

"Clothilde, forgive me," he said.

"Forgive!" She laughed hysterically. "*Croyez-vous, donc, que je pardonne si facilement les fautes semblables à celles-ci?* I thought that I would wed an *homme d'honneur*, not a one that would insult his *flancéel*!"

"Heaven forbid, that I should hurt you! I wished only to know in what I had offended. I only begged you to explain. Was it not natural that I should wish to see you, at once, after all these days? to kiss your cheek, to hear your lips frame words —"

But for Michael it was a conversation of arrests. She dashed his eloquence aside with a stamp of her foot.

"*Mon Dieu*, you try to cover yourself with some excuses. *C'est juste, bien juste. Continuez, continuez jusqu'à minuit — si vous le voulez. Avec les hommes c'est toujours ainsi.* And — and I thought that you did love me."

"Did! Clothilde, I swear. Of course I loved you — of course I —"

Mademoiselle recoiled as if struck.

"Did! Loved!" cried the little termagant. "You love me no longer, *tenez*. You wished to me see — *afin de me le dire*. You could not wait, it must be now, à l'instant; you come to quarrel, *n'est-ce pas*, with me — la pauvre petite. You love some another. *J'en suis sûre*."

She fixed her little frightened eyes on him, one hand raised to her forehead. Michael was amazed.

"No, no, I swear."

But it was useless; at his protest Mademoiselle laughed in his face — a grating, mirthless laugh it sounded to his ears.

"Ah, swear, swear! *Jurez devant Dieu, si vous le voulez. Mais c'est en vain; you are cruel — cruel. Vous ne m'avez jamais aimée*."

With a little *moué* she leaned back against the marble of the chimney-piece — eyes shut, lips compressed. For a minute, maybe, she stood thus, then, with a shudder, seemed to collect herself. Her hands became busy, plucking at the rings that loaded them; feverishly she snatched the baubles from her slim fingers. One, two, three, they fell and spun across the floor; but she was sightless to that; one only she kept in her hand — it was of pearls and diamonds — and held it out to him.

"*Voilà, le témoignage de notre engagement, notre bague de fiançailles, je vous la rends. Ciel, elle me brule!*"

She made a little move as of pain, and thrust the jewelled thing into his hand.

"I did not think — so soon — to give you it back — so soon — *Mais je vous renverrai tous les bijoux* — the necklace, the fan, the studs — *tous — tous. Vous ne*

m'aimez pas; vous aimez quelqu'une autre. You come to tell me you could not wait and because I was *une peu distraite, fatiguée* you talk of — *O Dieu! Dieu!* ”

With sobs, mumbled snatches of prayer, bitings at her ting rag of a handkerchief, she fell back in her chair, her face pressed against the blue satin cushion. At her side kneeled Michael, distress, bewilderment in his eyes.

“Clothilde, Clothilde!” he besought. But the hand he endeavored to take was snatched away, the sobs continued. Heavens, what an actress!

Then, presently, Sir Michael realised that it was useless, useless to beseech, apologise, make love — she was like a child. He rose sharply to his feet, and, striding to the window, glared out. From there he could see into Soho Square with its great houses and the green trees in the centre; they were moving in the wind; the bluff wind that was blowing the dust into currents and eddies — once, as he looked, a street vendor was hidden to the eyes in a rushing whirling column.

From behind him, in the room, came the sound of faint sobs and a ticking from the little French clock — the minutes seemed now to race, now to stand still. As to Sir Michael's thoughts, after the first rush of horror and amazement, he was wondering what he should do, and then, after a tolerable amount of speculation, decided — very wisely — that there was nothing to be done; he must wait; hope for a cessation or an interruption — he even wished for Mrs. Howard. So he stood by the window, hands clasped behind his coat tails, watching dully what went forward in the street. He beheld ladies swinging along in their chairs; a postchaise driven by a red-cheeked youth, a butcher

jogging on a gray horse, a yellow cur gnawing a bone, just rescued from the kennel. The wind still blew, the sun still shone, as when he had, so blithely, arrived at Dean Street bringing his roses — only he was changed. His love and hopes seemed shattered, his plans and anticipations dead e'er they were scarcely born. But did he seem like a man mute with sorrow, dumb with grief? I fancy not. He was passive because he was nonplused, dumb because speech seemed useless; at heart he was a little impatient of it all — certainly that heart was not broken. And yet, for the time, his grief and dismay seemed very keen to him.

Then, presently as he watched, a lull fell on the street, it lay deserted but for the cur that slunk off at the approach of another; into the lack of movement came a chair — the men trotting. Swiftly they passed down the street, stopped at No. 10; in a moment the head was raised and out sprang — Lord Fortington.

With a stifled ejaculation Sir Michael set his eyes closer to the window; he would await events, but his mind was busy. What was young Fortington doing here; was it not only yesterday that Mrs. Howard and her niece had left Fortington House? Had the young fool escorted them to town? Then he smiled as he heard the sound of voices below; Sambo was denying admittance again. And Mademoiselle it seems had also heard, for she had half risen from her chair.

"Qu'est qu'il y a?" cried she.

There was anxiety in her voice — a hoarseness; she appeared to speak with difficulty. She was very pale.

Seeing the distress in her eyes, Michael came forward.

"What is the matter, dear?" he asked. "It is only young Fortington."

For a moment she was silent, then, with a little cry, clasped Michael's arm.

"*Je ne veux pas, je ne puis pas, le voir.* Go, go to the corridor, hide if he come."

Stung by her misery, the pleading in her eyes, Michael turned to do as she asked him. It was too late, as he moved there came the sound of running footsteps, the door was burst open and in rushed Lord Fortington crying —

"Damme, Chloe, it's in the *Gazette* — I'm —" and he stopped as he saw Michael. "O Lord!" ejaculated he.

He was a pale-faced young man, bullet-headed, blue-eyed and freckled; remarkably thin in the leg, with a crook at the knee as if he were much in the saddle — which was the case. As he stood there now he looked like a schoolboy caught in a crime. Behind his back he was endeavoring to hide a crumpled news-sheet.

I will be sworn that the French clock ticked sixty times before any one spoke; then it was Mademoiselle. She was extraordinarily composed; one would never have said that she had been sobbing for twenty minutes on account of a wounded heart — there were, at any rate, no unsightly rims around her eyes.

"Milord Fortington," said she, "I did not expect this, I am angry; you are a *diable* — a brute."

The youth lowered his eyes.

"Oh, I say, Chloe!" he ejaculated. He did not understand that he ought to help Clothilde out of an excessively awkward position.

In the midst of another breath-catching pause Michael held out his hand.

"May I see the news-sheet," said he; "I did not look at it this morning."

At his question Fortington fidgeted.

"Egad, Stanton, it's better you shouldn't — it's —"

But the black and white lady interfered.

"*Donnez le à lui*," she said faintly.

Reluctantly Fortington handed it over, then sank powerless into a chair, his pale face flushed mulberry. He was a youth who thought much of fighting when he was not a combatant — but a scene like this — bah! — it made him sick.

The sheet was folded as if expressly — Michael instantly found what he sought. He read these words:

"We are informed on high authority that the marriage between Sir M—— S——n and Mademoiselle C—— C——y of —— Street, not a hundred miles from the fashionable Soho Square, will not take place: Mademoiselle, it is asserted, is now affianced to the young Earl of F——ton."

With a gesture of impatience Sir Michael crumpled the paper in his fingers and let it fall to the carpet. Then he turned to Clothilde.

"I understand now, Mademoiselle," said he, "you, too, had not seen the news-sheet this morning. Your refusal to admit me, then the acceding to my request, your coolness — your imperiousness — were all pre-arranged. You wished to pick a quarrel — to set me in the wrong. Clever, clever!"

"Monsieur!" cried the little lady indignant.

"You had arranged something of the sort no doubt with Lord Fortington — poor young man, he could see no wrong in it! And now, when through the tattle of some servant the thing has leaked out, he could not contain himself but has come, at a trot, to talk over matters. Of course you wished to keep things hidden

for a time — it would not have been a pretty story even for London society — a flirt is —”

But he was stopped. They had ignored little Fortington, treated him as a child; Michael had, certainly, not reckoned with him. But, all the while, he had been rebelling at this glaring injustice; thunder-struck that any one could speak this of his goddess — *Clothilde aux yeux noirs*. At the word “flirt” he was up in a flash, a glove in his hand.

“Take that,” he cried, and struck at Michael’s face.

The fingers of the glove flipped his cheek, for Fortington was above his wits with anger, and Michael laughed. He, too, was in a strange mood; hard and cynical with grief and wounded pride.

“What are you at, Fortington?” said he. “I give you Mademoiselle with all my heart, there is no need to quarrel — take her.”

But the amorous youth was in earnest — one is often, you know, strangely earnest in youth; was he not Clothilde’s champion? Champion to the sweet little Clothilde who, by now, had collapsed, half fainting, in her chair.

“I suppose,” said the boy, “that I can defend my honor and that of the lady?”

Michael smiled; truly the whole affair was somewhat whimsical; but he saw that it was useless to deny the hot youth — at any rate for the moment.

“You want to fight?” He shrugged his shoulders. “Very well; you know my rooms — King Street, St. James’s — or, rather, I must refer you to Captain Kitson who lodges at 19, Sackville Street.”

Fortington bowed awkwardly.

“To-morrow will suit me — if it does you,” said Sir

Michael shortly. He crossed the room, opened the door and was gone. As he descended the stairs he heard Clothilde sobbing, the sound of a shower of loud, boyish kisses and the words:

“ Henri, mon brave, mon brave! ”

CHAPTER III

THE UNKNOWN

SIR MICHAEL descended the stairs, snatched up his hat and gloves, and strode out into the street. It was difficult to gauge his mind and sensations at that moment, difficult to see how much grief struggled with the sense of wounded pride and righteous indignation. Yet the very absence of any deep feeling shows clearly that his love for Mademoiselle Chamby had been no love at all — only a blind infatuation, which a shock such as this could shatter. Sir Michael, of course, did not, as yet, realise how baseless it had been; but when a man thinks more of his wounded vanity than of his wounded heart it shows that that little organ cannot be much the worse.

As he walked down the street — his emotions were too hot, too large, to be cooped in chair or chaise — his thoughts were not of his “blighted hopes,” or sorrow and “soul anguish,” but thoughts concerning the remarks and innuendoes of his friends and of the town. Yet from this do not think him heartless, a man of pride; this sense of shame was indeed a healthy sign, showing how little was his affection for so worthless an object as Clothilde. Had he been completely in love he would have said: “I am heart-broken, the most wretched of men,” or uttered some other trite cry of despair, in place of “Little flirt, she will make me the buffoon of London!” And for this feeling of

ignominy I have great sympathy; it is nothing to boast of when one is jilted by a little French nobody just because that nobody wishes to marry an Earl in place of a Baronet!

He was half-way to King Street — striding forward in a turmoil — when his hand chanced to feel something hard in his pocket; something which certainly had not been there on his way to Dean Street. He paused at a street corner, where the wind was screened by a jutting doorway, and drew out between his fingers — the ring. It was a simple thing, but of exquisite workmanship, and containing pearls and diamonds of lustre and value; it had cost Sir Michael more than he cared to own — one does not at any time fancy the look of a gift that has been returned; this was abhorrent.

Mademoiselle had not been the recipient of one *bijou* alone — an infatuation almost always leads to more extravagance than Love with a capital L — and now, as he stood there in the street, he wondered if he would ever again see the other baubles — a pearl necklace, diamond shoe-buckles, a locket set with amethysts, a volume of poems bound in calf with marbled edges — very dear. The returning of the ring had added to the dramatic effect of Clothilde's tirade; the ring *had* to be given back, but the remainder — who knew?

Then, while Sir Michael was in the midst of these speculations, the wind came round in an eddy and caused a shop-sign, beneath which he was unconsciously standing, to swing and creak on rust-clogged hinges.

At the sound Michael looked up and carelessly read the inscription — it was done in faded white on a blue ground.

“H. J. Horniman, Seller of Jewellery. Merchandise

from the East, etc. You are invited to walk in. To buy or to sell."

The invitation amused Sir Michael; he smiled. Why not sell? Sell this morsel of dazzling metals, which was burning his hand, firing the indignity into his soul. It had cost him seventy pounds, if he could get fifty pounds for it he would sell; not otherwise. Why should he lose more than twenty pounds of good money because of a tricky little mademoiselle? He was very bitter, you see.

Having arrived at what, I consider, a very sensible conclusion Sir Michael entered the shop of Mr. H. J. Horniman. It was a strange place, not by any means large; dark too, for the light came through bottled glass, and there was no other illuminant. So dark was it, indeed, that Sir Michael, coming from the sunshine and the keen blue skies, found it difficult to distinguish objects. His first impression was of a long, low room paneled to the stooping ceiling with oak — where the walls were perceivable; here, there, everywhere one found giant cupboards and cabinets, shells, tapestries and arras; on every hand were oddities and oddments. There were monstrous, bulging vases of blue and gold; mandarins; hideous, staring gods; masks; strange weapons — all from the East. Materials too: lustrous silks, intricate embroideries; carpets from Arabia and Persia; metal-work from India; knick-knacks from the Antipodes along with swords and guns, armour, lace, jewellery, ivories; antiques from all parts of our world, brought to London in great merchantmen, which had sailed many a turquoise sea and many a steel one; under bellying sails or skeleton rigging.

Sir Michael saw all these things by degrees, as his eyes attuned themselves to the light, and all the while

strange scents rose to his nostrils — the breath of cedar-wood, musk, spices, tea, and a medley of others. Next, vaguely at first, he perceived the human contents of the curio shop.

At the further end of the room he beheld the figure of a woman leaning across a narrow wooden counter. She was speaking — earnestly he thought — to a little wrinkled man, who peered at something on the counter before him through horn-rimmed spectacles. The old man wore a beard — a thing not common in those days — and his face shone white in the opaque light. The lady appeared indistinct, almost visionary, until Sir Michael's eyes had stared still longer into the gloom.

It seems that he must have entered silently, for the pair did not appear to remark his presence and they continued talking. He could not catch the words — even if he had wished to play the eavesdropper — but he could tell by the sound of their low voices that they were finishing a conversation; then came the clink of money and the lady said "Thank you," in a louder tone. She was selling, not buying, it seemed.

And now he could see plainly the figure that stooped over the counter. She was tall, exquisitely proportioned and slim; against the dim confused colors of a sheet of tapestry he distinguished the sweeping outline of her figure, clad in moss-green cloth. Above was the paleness of her face; plain to be seen was the curve of her cheek, the arch of her neck, but he could not discover the color of her eyes, the length of her lashes, or the form of her lips.

These points, these intimate points, were denied to Sir Michael for the moment, but the figure, the poise of

her head, the hand that lay at her side, were clearly visible. She wore a wide green hat with one sweeping plume; the brim came low over her right ear, but, from where Sir Michael stood, he could see the wondrous color of her hair; in the dull light it shone like copper. She was, it seemed, a princess in a goblin cave.

The further chink of money sent Michael forward. The girl — she was little more, a blending of girl and woman — and the old man started; neither had guessed at his presence.

“One moment, sir, one moment if you please,” said Mr. Horniman in a voice thin and reedy. “I am completing a purchase. Is that correct, ma’am, two hundred and —”

But the lady stopped him with a gesture.

“Yes, quite correct; thank you. Good-day.” And she gathered a little pile of gold and a bundle of notes into her satchel; that completed, she turned to smile at the old man and started toward the door; but in a moment she paused, turned back, and whispered in the old man’s ear. Then aloud:

“You will remember.”

“Certainly, ma’am, certainly.” And Mr. Horniman looked shrewd behind his glasses.

“Thank you; good-day,” said the lady again. Then, gathering up her skirt, she walked down the shop, picking her way between idols, boxes and rags and so to the door; the old man shuffled behind her. Sir Michael stood back in the shadow, hat in hand. For a moment, as Mr. Horniman opened the door, and she passed out — why on earth Sir Michael had not done that politeness I cannot tell you; he was paralysed

perhaps — the sunlight streamed in and touched her hair; he saw, too, as she turned, the color of her eyes — they were gray and tender.

When the radiant vision had faded, and the door was closed, the old man came shuffling back. In the dim light he appeared like a grotesque beetle living in dusty corners, only moving to show some goods to a trusting fly. But Michael had few thoughts for him; his mind was following the Unknown.

“Your pleasure, sir?”

The voice struck out in the darkness. Michael’s wanderings of thought had made him forget his errand, why he was standing in the little shop; he had even forgotten that he stood there. But these words — these servile, greedy words — captured his erring brain. It was to sell a ring. Of course!

“I wish to sell this,” said he shortly, and held it forth.

Mr. Horniman leant forward and took the ring; then moved to the counter and began to examine it under the large eye of a microscope. Our hero — for thus I must call Sir Michael — followed him; he was bent on prying. He wished to behold the merchandise in which beauty trafficked. He was rewarded.

On the polished sepia wood of the counter lay a tangle of gleaming stones. Even in that obscurity he could distinguish a rope of pearls — large and milky; a diamond heart and a ring, almost plain — merely, indeed, a band of gold set with one large ruby.

Mr. Horniman’s scrutiny continuing — it seemed he could see in the dark with the ease of an owl — Sir Michael stretched out his hand, and, separating the jewels, drew forth the ruby ring; it seemed to fascinate him. But the movement attracted the old jeweller’s

attention: with a little exclamation he, too, stretched out his hand.

"Your pardon, sir, your pardon. But I promised, sir, that these things — these trumperies — should be kept hidden for a while — that I should not sell them."

"Hidden!" cried Michael.

"Indeed, sir, I speak truth. Though I have paid a good price for these — er — trumperies as I said, I have given my word, sir, to keep them six months before I display or show them for sale."

He seemed a garrulous, senile old wretch, which was what Sir Michael wished. He seemed in a fair way of learning more, even all, that Mr. Horniman knew of the Unknown.

"So that is what she whispered to you — an injunction?"

Mr. Horniman started.

"Indeed, sir," he said, "you surprise me; but, since you have guessed so much, sir, I can do no harm in admitting that you are correct, sir. The lady whispered that."

"They seem good gems though you choose to despise them," continued Michael, holding the ruby ring between his eyes and the window.

"Marry, sir, they are good enough; in fact, for all I call them trumperies — it is a habit one falls into, sir, I do assure you — they are valuable jewels. But what you hold, sir, is of little worth, I do not advise you to buy it — look at these here. That heart is of Brazil diamonds; the ring which you hold of little value. The stone is no ruby but an amardine, worth a matter of twenty pounds perhaps — half the value of the ring with which you wish to part. You perceive that I am candid, sir?"

Michael stayed this flow of comment with a movement. Mr. Horniman glanced upward through his spectacles.

"No matter the values, I will take this ring and leave you mine. Is it a bargain?"

A desire had entered Sir Michael's mind, a desire to possess the jewel which the Unknown had sold — it seemed, in a manner, as if it belonged to her. A strange quixotic view I admit; but there it was, and the young man gave way to it.

"But, sir, the lady commanded —"

"No matter, no matter. For you it is a good bargain — is that not enough? Egad, it is a thriving bargain, and you can rest quiet; I swear that no one save myself and one other shall see the ring for all your six months."

With a grin of pleasure Mr. Horniman nodded. Indeed, he was a despicable old wretch to barter his promises for twenty pounds, though Sir Michael was equally to blame; but in truth he had done so and there, for him, was an end of it. As to Sir Michael, he merely slipped the ring — gold, you will remember, with an amardine — into his pocket and prepared to leave the shop. But, on the threshold, he paused.

"You know nothing of the lady?" he asked keenly.

Mr. Horniman glanced up from a jealous regard of his gain in the deal. He was a fitting god to rule over these grotesques and exotics.

"Nothing, sir, nothing, your Honor. She was to me a stranger; but I trust she will return again. I say that strangers with wares such as these suit me — I care not whence they come, sir. A wise man asks no questions,"

With an angry look Sir Michael turned and left the shop.

"Pshaw," said he inwardly, "'twas monstrous of the creature to speak thus, to insinuate against the Unknown. I should like to crush this obnoxious beetle."

Sir Michael was quite ruffled.

CHAPTER IV

DECISION

FROM the shop of Mr. Horniman, Sir Michael walked in the way of Sackville Street. For him it had been a morning of sensations, a *matinée* of shocks; already, and it was not long past noon, he had been jilted, challenged to a duel, exchanged a ring — and thereby lost a matter of fifty pounds — fallen, more or less, out of love and fallen, more or less, in again.

By this you must not think our Hero — with a great H — was as fickle as the little French mademoiselle. Indeed, he was nothing of the sort. To begin with, I exaggerate when I say that he had fallen in love again; he was, to speak strictly, only interested, deeply interested in the Unknown. He wanted to know who and what she was; why she should sell jewels — and rare ones at that — and then wish to conceal her actions. This had piqued his curiosity; the lines of her form, the color of her hair, her voice and, lastly, the tenderness — with just a little fear — in those eyes had piqued his senses; slightly stirred his heart; stirred the same heart which, so short a time before, had been so disillusioned.

Arrived at Sackville Street he asked for Captain Kitson; but, finding Captain Kitson to be out, Sir Michael entered his rooms — I will tell you more of them anon — and wrote a note.

"DEAR JACK,— I have been forced into a fight with young Fortington; don't blame me — I'm, as you know, no butcher. When he sends to you, will you act for me? It's to be to-morrow early — steel or lead as they like. You will guess the reason of the imbroglio from the news-sheet. Yours,

"MICHAEL S."

A business-like, masculine affair as it should be. Michael sighed with relief or weariness as he folded it; that done, he laid it on a table, and marched out.

During the afternoon Sir Michael remained at King Street; for, I must tell you, he had an uncomfortable sensation that he was the talk, the butt of the town — and in that he was not far wrong.

London, at that moment devoid of other scandal, had eagerly seized on this little morsel and waxed spiteful over it. In many a drawing-room, in many a coffee-house, in many a boudoir, and in the Park, eyebrows were raised at Sir Michael's name; folk smiled.

"Sir Michael — little Chamby — you remember — jilted! — by gad! — for Fortington — No? — Indeed, yes — poor devil! — by a Frenchee — what? — Sir Michael. Little Chamby —" and all over again and again. Such, in truth, were the conversations, behind fans, across tea-bowls, over cards, under trees. You will say that Sir Michael knew nothing of all this; he did not definitely, but he knew London or rather the little fragment of London which dubs itself "Society." Also, on his return from Sackville Street, when passing along the Mall, he had seen two of his acquaintances — Dick Therrold and Lord Ostly — nudge each other, and stifle a laugh.

Sir Michael had returned to his rooms flushed and mortified, and had, at once, ordered his man to pack his things, inform the landlord that he should want his lodgings no longer, and command a horse — a good blood horse — to be ready for him to-morrow. It had been his intention to take mademoiselle, when they were married, down to Devonshire; now he would go there without her. He would flee from this city; this city of flirts and jilts, of gossip and whisperings; flee to the sweet country, to Devon, to Stanton Hall. He would live on the good red soil, wander amidst his own woods and fields; wander where he could mount hills and catch the blue line of the sea beyond the curtain of the cliffs. He would have done with the world; six years of Life was enough. During all that six years twice only had he been down to Devon — three months out of six years — and then he had been bored; terribly bored. But now he would be bored no longer; he would see to the estate, look personally into matters, shoot and hunt perhaps, study in the well-filled library (his father had been something of a book-worm); be, in fact, the thorough Squire, the ideal Englishman. At least he would have a trial at the ideal.

You will, perhaps, observe that he took no account of the duel; it did not at all seem to interrupt his plans; and, indeed, why should it? Was he not one of the best swordsmen in London? It would, surely, be easy enough to disarm little Fortington, for he had no intention of hurting him — a scratch at most; far less did he wish to put an end to his valueless life. One thing only disturbed him, by leaving London he would, maybe, flee from the Unknown. Yet, how would it help even if he remained; how should he find

her in this world of atoms? She was, in very truth, Unknown.

He was in the midst of depressing business when Jack Kitson came into the room. Sir Michael was, indeed, doing nothing less than ransacking a large bureau; finding and destroying old letters that still held subtle perfumes between their sheets. Amongst them he found odd things; a crumpled glove; dead flowers, brown as dust; the heel of a dainty shoe; an old dagger which had tried to pierce his lungs one dark night in Verona; pages of half-written verse, pledges, notes, bills and *billets-doux*; these, and a score of other things, which he wished to tear and burn and forget. (O Youth, Youth, how strange, sweet and bitter, are the mementos which we keep of you! Happy they who can crush and burn them with fingers and with fire; for with many they are locked into the heart — our single safety-place — eternally with us.)

Jack Kitson, then, came upon Sir Michael seated in a wilderness of weeds sprung from the fertile past; but he was too wise to remark the odd litter on the floor, and the torn and crumpled letters. He merely entered, and sank into a chair.

“Poor fellow,” said he; “so you are to fight a baby.”

The captain was a lean, hard-faced officer with a heavy mouth and a pointed chin. Yet every other item of his physiognomy appeared insignificant, almost futile, when set in comparison to his nose; it was, indeed, a nose worthy of a second glance; for though by no means fat, it was of extraordinary length, coming down his face, like a ruled line, quite a number of inches. In texture it was tough, inflexible and gristly — a soldier's nose without a doubt.

In character the Captain was what his appearance warranted; a keen fighter, a strong friend, a lover of life and its amenities. In camp, on the march, or in the battle reek, he was fearless, denying, resolute, uncomplaining as a Spartan; but, once away from duty, once on leave, he liked the "little fixtures" of life as he called them. He was not extremely luxurious, as his dress and his rooms would show, but he delighted in the best of everything. For instance his dress — when out of uniform — was always of some meagre color, a drab, a sepia brown, a black; there was no gold, no embroidery, no buckle or jewel about him, yet the cloth and the fit was impeccable, the cambric of his ruffles spotless, his hair powdered and arranged to a nicety. So, too, with his rooms; they might at first glance look bare as a barracks, yet one found plenty of padded chairs, a blazing fire; one would be offered rare wines, good tobacco, excellent snuff or an elegant dice box. Touching the last I must admit that the Captain was a firm believer in the joys of play; indeed it was across the cards that Sir Michael first met him; it had been at Baden, three years back.

In conclusion, I will say that he was an ardent admirer of the poetry of Horace; indeed never — not even on the battle-field — was he without a small, calf-bound copy of the Odes and Epodes. (From this fact you may deduce what you will.)

On his entrance Michael had looked up with a start; he did not very much care that the Captain should see his occupation. He said nothing, and Kitson, having drawn a pinch of snuff up his long nose, began:

"So you've lost your girl, and are risking losing your breakfast to-morrow, eh? No, no man; I've no intention of insulting you; did you really think that

little yellow-pated monkey could stand up against you? But there is always a chance against the certainties; for instance a man *could* throw double sixes fifty times following. It's possible. But, there ain't much chance of your being pinked by Fortington; for you it will merely mean a deucedly inconvenient drive at a damned inconvenient hour. Six o'clock, when one goes to bed at four, ain't exactly anything to praise the gods for, eh?"

Michael smiled contentedly; it was pleasant to have this balm of running conversation on his sore feelings.

"I'm only sorry, Kitson, that you should be put to such inconvenience."

"Sorry! What, man, d'ye think I'm off for a fight? And a fight in which I shall see that jelly-eyed Fortington stuffed in the mud — though it is all for the jade of a Frenchee. Confound 'em all for a race of —"

But Michael held up his hand.

"Think, Jack, think," said he smiling, "was not Clarice — *Clarice aux Etoiles* — a Lyonnaise?"

"Oh, come man —"

Kitson smacked his lean shank; then, looking up, met Michael's eye and laughed — or rather Michael laughed and Jack roared. It seemed impossible that so vast a sound should come from so waspish a body; it was as surprising as a shout from a skeleton.

"Ah, there are exceptions — always exceptions — and Clarice was one — poor Clarice!"

A pause followed, and the Captain snuffed. Sir Michael broke the silence.

"I'm going out of London to-morrow — to leave London for I don't know how long. A year perhaps."

"A year, Michael? By Jupiter's thunder, where the deuce are you going?"

"To Devon — to Stanton Hall in the county of Devon. I am to flee from town."

"That's all very well, but how about *patriæ quis exsul se quoque fugit?*" stammered Kitson. "And what the devil will you do?"

He was all amazement.

"Farm, study; shoot perhaps; hunt it is probable. To —"

"Marry your cook and breed stable-boys," snapped the Captain.

"No, I think not," smiled Michael; "I've had enough of women — women and their tongues. That's my reason — I'm sick, yes, sick of London and its Society; if I stayed here I should take to the bottle — as you have done."

"Oh, damme!"

"Forgive me, Kitson, I meant the dice-box — you can't deny that! With the bottle you are not much worse than the rest of us. I don't blame you — why should I? I'm only weary of it all."

Jack Kitson got to his feet, a smile was on his lips; something like pity in his eye.

"Have you done?"

"Yes."

"Then let me confess I can't understand you; that you should want to run away like a dog with a singed tail just because of a sore heart and tingling ear. Brave it out, show you don't mind who the Frenchee wants; show that you don't care a click of the fingers if she prefers a dressed-up puppy to you. Ain't there as fine women in the world as ever? Take my advice — come to my rooms to-night, have a rousing evening, a quartette of claret-bottles — *nunc vino pellite curas* — a song or two, cards or dice — which you may pre-

fer. Then, at cockcrow, stuff your head into a bucket of cold water, and you will be as fit as a new-laid egg for the fencing — it's swords by the way — and to-morrow you will have forgotten this thinness of your skin. You are not the first man who has been jilted. What are a few old hags, a print-seller, and a score of dirty little pen-wielders in Grub Street? Nothing to make this fuss about. You, the man who fought for the Margrave with his last hope — who pricked Signor Danielo, who wanted to play against the rascal Holstein, who —”

“Shut up, Kitson,” put in Michael; “it's decided — I give up the world.”

“And the flesh — and the devil?”

“The first can go to the last for all I care.”

What a way to treat a man; this flippancy, this mockery of his love, his grief and indignation! He did not perceive — you or I would not have in his position — what wisdom lanky Jack Kitson had spoken; did not realise that in him he had as staunch a friend as men can find.

But Kitson did not care for the other's irritation, he had, indeed, anticipated it. So he moved over to the window and yawned; it was a prodigious yawn, which made you see two rows of perfect teeth.

“All's arranged, then, for to-morrow,” said he. “Seconds, weapons, doctors — egad, what a fumble to make over the spitting of a cockerel. If you don't want to drown or play away your sorrow I will arrive here in a chase at 5.30, and pray the gods it won't rain.”

“Thank you,” murmured Michael. He was seated before the fire, his back to Kitson; he did not know that his friend was on the point of departure.

At the door Kitson paused, eyes wandering regretfully over the litter on the floor. What a chance for reminiscences, for teasings, winks and blinks! How well he remembered the owner of the shoe, the heel of which lay before him! But he knew it was not the time.

"The bottles start at nine precisely," said he, and went out.

CHAPTER V

A NIGHT AND A MORNING

SIR MICHAEL, left to himself, continued to ponder, dwelling with his own melancholy thoughts; but two hours of this introspective conversation was enough — one must, it seems, be a philosopher in order fully to appreciate one's own self for any lengthy time. And thus, when the clock had ticked off one hundred and twenty seconds since the Captain's departure and was, in fact, striking seven, Sir Michael rang for his man, and ordered his green satin suit to be prepared. Much to his own surprise — and to yours, also, I suspect — he wished to go to Jack Kitson's. He would go, too! And here I may as well say that his man was one Pierre, a Swiss born in the Jura; an excellent fellow, who spoke English almost equal to his master's, and half a dozen other tongues as well; who was discreet, intelligent; shortish in height, of a pale complexion under chestnut hair — he wore his own tied with a black riband — with a wide mouth and blue eyes which, on occasion, came together into a squint. His wages were ample, and he was of a frugal mind; there was but one thing, I believe, he loved beside his master and his natal land — that thing was Dutch cheese. With these words I will dismiss him; he has no great part to play in my tale, yet without him Sir Michael would often have been at a loss.

At 8.30 P. M. behold Sir Michael, resplendent in em-

erald satin and emerald hose, arrived at Sackville Street; where already were assembled a dozen or so similar gorgeous gentlemen — all in the Captain's parlor. In the centre of the room was a long table of reflecting mahogany, bright with silver candle-sticks and glasses; there was wine, too, in beautiful decanters, with cards and a dice-box; snuff, pipes, and fragrant tobacco in china jars. A fire burnt on the hearth — a fire which gave thoughts of hot milk-punch to many of the guests — while placed around the table were comfortable chairs of elegant Caroline pattern. The walls were sparsely hung with prints, while on the mantel-shelf stood a little bust of Horace. As I have said, the Captain was a man of comfort — luxury if you like — but of no ostentation. He liked warmth, good wine, cards, and a jolly supper — the last, by-the-bye, was preparing in an adjoining room — but he had no love of superfluous extravagance.

'As Sir Michael entered all the gentlemen looked up. They noticed that there was something a little wild in his eyes, a little strange; it was obvious that here was a man come to drown his melancholy thoughts in ruby wine; to cover his bruised sensibilities in the clacking of the dice-box and the flutter of cards.

"Gad, you've come; I'm delighted," said Kitson to Michael. He betrayed no surprise.

"Delighted to behold you," echoed fat Foulks of the Guards, languorously taking snuff; but he nudged his neighbor as if to say "Poor Devil," and Michael saw the movement. But now he was heedless of it; let them think, do, insinuate what they wished, what did he care — to-morrow he would be dead or on his way to Devon; to-night he was to forget. Before dawn he might be ruined, a winner improbably (he had indifferent luck),

drunk for a certainty. (These in reality were strange, delicious, abominable days; yet, for us, a wonderful tincture of romance pours through them!)

To-night Sir Michael was determined to ignore, be even oblivious of, these nudges and innuendoes; he meant to enjoy himself so far as he might, and gain what he could from the doubtful pleasures of wine and cards. So, with this determination, he set himself with the rest, at the long polished table, where the candle-light fell discreetly on golden guineas, moon-white silver, crisp notes; on glasses, cards, jewelled hands, lace ruffles, and velvet cuffs.

In such a frame of mind Sir Michael played on into the night; and he lost steadily, persistently, dully. Truly, Fortune was a jade for him that day.

At midnight — or thereabouts — they moved to the other room for supper; supper and more wine. Then came toasts and bibulous songs, the rhythm beaten with knives and glasses (how the wine slipped over the rims!). But though Sir Michael strove to drive down his cares — to which was now added the loss of five hundred guineas — melancholy held him. The lights and glitter hurt his eyes, the laughter, the songs irritated his ears; and though he permitted his glass to be refilled the moment that it was vacant, he drank for oblivion, from determination, not for enjoyment.

When a return to the card-room was afoot Michael followed the others listlessly; it was no allurements for him that he might win back his losings; he cared neither if he gained or lost. He somewhat envied young O'Mara who was sleeping, like a child, beneath the supper-table, cuddling a flagon-shaped decanter, the contents of which crimsoned his mauve breeches. Truly, Sir Michael was working himself to a pitiful condition,

and, as the hours fell away, he was extremely sorry for himself.

Before midnight he had played cards — faro for the most part — but now he joined the group round Kitson and the dice-box. It seemed a more lively pastime, it was even pleasant to hear the rattle of the ivory knobs against their leather prison.

And now luck turned; in a twinkling — for they played high — his five hundred guineas was before him; within the hour they had mounted to seven hundred, at the end of two, near twice that sum was beneath his fingers.

“Stap me,” said Foulks between his teeth, “the man’s got the devil’s own luck.”

And for a time it seemed as if he had; then, gradually, Fortune turned away and the gold and notes were reduced to nine hundred pounds or so.

Now, for it was growing late, many had fallen away from play; wine and punch had rendered them helpless, they lay in their chairs like stuffed figures that had been dug in the middle, arms hanging loosely at their sides. On the table lay the wreck of the evening; cards, over-tipped glasses, scattered snuff, a broken pipe, little heaps of gold, bundles of bank-notes; the light from the guttering candles fell on tired, flushed faces greedy with gain, wan through loss, or heavy with false slumber. The fire had died though the room was insufferably hot, reeking with the fumes of tobacco and spilt wine.

Michael, I assure you, was thankful when the last man of their group let fall the dice-box and jerked forward with a stupid chuckle, his nerveless arm sweeping a glass to the floor. Kitson alone was facing him now; on him the heat, the excitement, the frequent potations

had had but little effect — he was, by far, too old a campaigner. Perhaps the long bridge of his nose had added one deeper tint to its color, perhaps his eyes were a little blood-shot; that was all. And Michael? True he had drunk deep — and he was not like the Captain who could swallow a barrel of liquor and walk a rope — but that night wine had had little effect upon him; he was merely blurred in sense and perception, there was nothing fuddle-headed about him, nothing of heavy sleep as with the others. Certainly he would not object to a nap, but it did not seem imperative.

For a time Jack Kitson played with the dice-box in silence; then flung it down.

“Had enough of this pleasant hell, eh?” he asked.

“Many hours back; it is a poor amusement.”

“I always think that — afterward. But you took my advice; do you regret it?”

With a shrug of the shoulders, Michael rose wearily from his chair.

“No, I forgot — for a time; now I’m too clear headed.”

Then, crossing the room (none too steadily I admit), he went to the window, drew back the curtain, wrenched apart the shutters. Throwing up the sash, he leaned out into the sweet air.

It was near four of the clock on a pure June morning; the wind of yesterday had died and the cool atmosphere was still. Though the sun was not up, the outer world was alive with a soft luminosity, without shadow or contrast.

Michael bent eagerly to the air; it was cool to his flushed cheeks. He saw, with eyes a little vacant, the pale green of trees in a neighboring square, from their leafage came the twitter of sparrows. It was good,

indeed, when the ghost of a breeze blew on his burning eyes; he opened his mouth to draw a draught into his lungs.

Presently Kitson came up and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Come, man, and rest; remember you have to spit a lark within two hours, spit him so as not to damage his feathers. You want rest; in a bed, too, not like these swine round their trough. You are right to like the air. Faugh, how it smells!"

They turned back into the room — which, as you can fancy, was more than ever unwholesome-looking with daylight gushing through the window, shaming the wild-eyed, guttering candles — and, gathering together his winnings, Michael followed the Captain from the apartment. They crossed the landing and entered a bedroom.

"Here," said Jack, "lie and sleep for an hour; a coach comes for us at five, together we will go to King Street, where you may change your clothes, if you wish — and get your skewer. And the money? It's devilish uncomfortable to carry eight hundred odd guineas in your pocket. You can have notes for the lot if you care to — I've got enough of 'em."

"Thanks — presently," said Michael. "I want to sleep now."

He was sitting on the bed, his coat and wig flung on the floor. An over-powering desire for sleep had seized him.

"So I thought, I will call you at five — 't isn't long," said Kitson, and, turning, left the room.

At five o'clock, when the sun was peering into the card-room at 19, Sackville Street, a coach drew up out-

side with such an abominable rattle that it roused one or two of the sleepers and made them wonder if it were not time that their Johns and their Jameses were come to bear them in sedans, still drunken and drowsy, to their respective dwellings.

At the sound of wheels Jack Kitson sprang from a chair in the supper-room, alive on the instant, with all his keen senses on the alert. He went at once to his bedroom where Sir Michael lay slumbering, but he did not immediately wake him.

First he took a worn despatch box from an oaken chest, unlocked it, counted out eight hundred guineas in notes, and exchanged them with eight hundred guineas in gold from Sir Michael's winnings. It was a considerable sum to take at a short sitting even in those days, and the Captain's eyes gleamed a little curiously as he fingered the money.

The exchange done he moved to the bed, and for a moment paused to look at the man who lay there. Rough in manner and speech, coarse, a real soldier of fortune, his heart, his head or his soul (as you like) possessed some virtues beyond his paramount one—bravery. There was still a tenderness on occasion in that hardened heart, still a softening, a pity. Above all, he could be as good a friend as God's greatest saint.

Lightly now he touched Michael's arm.

"Come, man, up and into the sunshine!"

Michael sat up; though no campaigner like the Captain, he had served enough to have his senses quick within a minute of waking; now he knew all about himself, even after this night of revelry. Indeed it took little time for Michael and the Captain, wigged and booted, to be in the coach. In Sir Michael's bosom—between the cambric of his shirt and his skin—was a

bundle of notes to the value of eight hundred pounds; as well he possessed seventy guineas in a leathern purse.

As they drove away from Sackville Street, a sedan was just starting from the same door; through the glass they saw the red cheeks and the swollen eyelids — still closed in sleep — of young O'Mara.

"Poor boy," said Kitson, "he has barely finished nineteen years."

At six o'clock — how we march to time in this chapter — the pair arrived at the *rendez-vous* — Barn Elms, It was a meadow circled by the sweet-running Thames, which here goes round in a willow-hemmed semicircle — very convenient.

En route they had called at King's Street, where Sir Michael had exchanged his emerald satin suit for one of coffee-colored cloth. Then, too, had he ordered Pierre to be at Richmond at nine of the morning, astride a horse and leading another for himself. He was determined to ride straight away — if he were alive; the baggage could come by pack-horse or coach, as Pierre willed. Sir Michael could not endure the restriction of a chaise, he must be active and free while any thought of yesterday and of London — poor London! — was in his mind. Oh, how the thoughts came whirling back after the empty reprieve of that wild night!

It is of set purpose that I give you a scant account of the duel, for what, after all, is a scrape between a hero and a half-fledged lordling? Nothing for me to waste ink over.

There were (as you need no telling) all the adjuncts of a fight; principals, seconds, doctors, etc. A few preliminaries in the dew-wet grass, under spreading trees and a faint sky; then the measuring of distances

and swords, the given word and the rattle and cut of steel.

This was a short affair; half a score of passes, an attempted feint on Fortington's part — who, you may as well know, was pale as milk — and Michael had pinked him in the right breast. With a little gasp the youth fell, his sword losing its slim length in the long grass.

Next came the rush forward, not too quick (a man must not be over eager at the spiking of such a brat), the careful examination of the doctors, and the nodding of heads.

“Egad, a mere scratch!”

“A pox-mark.”

“A beauty-spot — excellent, well-judged.”

There was a laugh, and Fortington, wrapped in a *roquelaure*, was given a sip of *aqua vitæ* and helped to his chaise.

The rumble of wheels came next, and the field was left just as it had been an hour ago, save that the grass — some farmer's growing crop — was trampled and showed a few blades just touched with crimson.

And Michael was on his way to Richmond and the country — to Elysium. Farewell to town!

CHAPTER VI

A HALT AT WINTERSLOW

A MORNING of hot sunshine had given way to an afternoon of hard white clouds sailing against a blue sky with a raw breeze, breathing rain, coming up from the west. All the day Michael had ridden, with Pierre behind him, along the road that leads from London to Devonshire.

At the end of a breakfast with Kitson, taken at Richmond, he had set out as the clocks were striking nine and, since that hour, once only had they stopped to change horses and to eat; for Michael, though dog-weary, had determined to keep on. To-morrow he would idle, to-morrow he would not care, but to-day, he must feel leagues between himself and London. There were wild exaggerated ideas in his mind of what had happened; his heart was bitter. He railed against the world, against his friends, against the follies and vanities of humanity; above all — as was to be expected — he railed against women. For the time, I admit, he was a somewhat foolish young man, to whose warped perception the perfidy of mademoiselle, the insolence of young Fortington, the innuendoes of his friends appeared monstrous — unbearable. In his own mind he was the man most to be pitied in England.

It was now between five and six o'clock, and the chalk-white clouds had turned gray and misty as the couple of travelers rode up the steep hill out of Nether Wallop

— Sir Michael, as usual, in front, and Pierre fifty yards or so to the rear. They had changed horses at Basingstoke, where St. Michael had left the good mare that he had ridden for the larger part of the day; now he was astride a great dun-colored creature, a bit heavy in the hock, a trifle clumsy at the shoulders, but strong and, at times, swift.

It had been Sir Michael's intention to press on to Salisbury — a matter of another twelve miles or so — but as he breasted the hill and beheld the menacing sky, and felt the rain in the wind, he had a strong inclination to turn back and seek shelter at the modest inn of Nether Wallop. Then he recollected that, between this and Salisbury, stood a lonely hostelry — he had baited or rested there once — set in a dip of the downs. They could seek its shelter, even rest for the night if the rain came; for Sir Michael, though fierce and self-communicating as a dethroned king, still did not wish for a wet jacket.

As they continued along the bleak road, the wind was even a trifle chill under the clouds that were thickening and darkening shade by shade. Pierre, to tell the truth, was cursing under his breath with a frequency that made it well-nigh continuous; he was, in fact, horribly stiff and sore in the seat — eight hours in the saddle was too much for him after half a year of London idleness. He envied the men who were following with his master's baggage in a rough chaise, and at a more leisurely pace.

Within ten minutes the rain started, fitfully at first, and in almost playful gusts, then with more persistence. Up here on the downs there was no shelter, no trees by the way-side; the scattered clumps of beech or fir were far away to left and right and, near the road, only small juniper bushes speckled the turf. In a dip of the way

they stopped and Pierre unstrapped, first his master's, and then his own cloak, from the crupper of his horse. But even with these wrapped tight around them, the rain was deucedly wetting.

It was with a shock of gladness that Sir Michael, having capped another undulation — the road, you must know, rises and falls like the back of a caterpillar — saw below him the desolate inn — Winterslow Hut, its name — set in a little patch of trees.

"We will stay there," called back Michael, pointing with his whip. Behind him, Pierre praised Heaven.

As they approached the inn door — a good enough house, around which stood a pond, a fairish patch of garden and a large huddle of out-houses — a chaise was being pulled to the rear by a couple of men. At the sight Sir Michael frowned; there were other travelers it seemed; he had wished to be alone. But in a moment his frown turned to a look of perplexity, and then joy thrilled him. A sound from above had attracted his attention — the rasp of a shaking window; he raised his eyes and beheld that which he least looked to see. Through the window, against which the rain was driving, looked the Unknown!

It was with a smile — the first which had moved his lips for many hours — that Sir Michael dismounted and rapped at the inn door. He was praising Heaven for the rain as fervently as Pierre had cursed it.

Then the door opened and the host appeared. He was a typical fellow, red in the cheek, full in the paunch; a man who looked as if he were determined to forget the loneliness of his dwelling with the material pleasure of food and drink. With a bow and a rubbing together of plump, and none too spotless, hands, he began.

It appeared that there was no difficulty about a room;

certainly there should be one for his Honor, one for his Honor's servant, and one for his Honor's horse. A change of horses? No, he feared that was impossible; that would have to be managed at Salisbury — eight miles or so from here — at the White Hart, the George, the — No, he feared that he could not give his Honor a private room. His house was made up of bedrooms and a large dining-parlor; his guests were usually swept in by the elements — he did not use these words, nor the exact sense of them, but this was what he implied — and he liked all the spare space for beds. Not but what many honorable and renowned gentlemen had slept there! Indeed, only last week, he had received my Lady Ogelby and Sir James and the Earl of — He feared that his Honor must take supper in the parlor, there were but three other guests; a man from the Winterbournes, a gentleman on the road to London who was already a-bed — he had taken a chill — and a lady —

But Sir Michael held up his hand, he was weary of standing in the porch; the man's tongue was like a torrent!

"I can sup, as you say, in the parlor; if the lady has no objection I have none," said he hypocritically. "Now show me my room — you can continue, if you wish, as we go."

And so, with a running fire of conversation — or rather of comments — on the weather, his kitchen, his cellar and Heaven knows what beside, "Mine Host" led Sir Michael to a moderately-sized apartment, plainly but comfortably furnished. There he left him with a promise of an excellent supper within the hour.

Alone, Michael threw aside his water-soused cloak and sat down in a chair. He was tired, certainly tired — a night of cards and drink, a duel and an eight hour

ride with only a snatch of sleep must tell on the most virile; but though Michael was certainly weary, and though his limbs were enjoying the laxity and ease of a rest, and his eyes almost mechanically closed, his mind was busy with the riddle of the Unknown; the thought of her awakened his drooping spirits to an astounding degree.

The coincidence was certainly amazing; that these two — just a nondescript He and a glorious She — should choose the same small inn in all wide England; He and a She who only yesterday had encountered, by chance, in a little jeweller's shop; but a She who, for the time, had so dazzled and bewildered him, that he had bought a ring which she had sold, and been himself thereby considerably the loser. Ah, the ring! Sir Michael searched in his pockets. Of course not! Fool that he was — he had left the ring in town. It lay, without a doubt, in the pocket of a pair of apricot-colored breeches.

Truth to tell, all through that day's ride Sir Michael had thought little of the stranger; he somehow imagined that she had passed from his life as completely and definitely as Mademoiselle Chamby; that her appearance has been brief and elusive as a dream. Her face and form had only remained in his mind as those of a beautiful picture once seen, which can be recollected at will, but which one does not hope, or at any rate expect, to see again in the future. It had been like that to Sir Michael, and, behold, here they were beneath the same roof, about to sup together at the same board!

Now all thoughts of Mademoiselle Clothilde and of London had vanished from his brain; his thoughts were busy only with this woman, whom yesterday he had encountered in Mr. Horniman's little shop. His mind

was busy with what he could recall of that swift episode; he endeavored to remember the words she had spoken, the look, the intonation. The passing interest of yesterday returned doubled; he was afire with curiosity, with admiration.

A knock sounded at the door, and Pierre entered, bearing the small valise which he had carried all day behind his saddle. His entrance set Michael to a new kind of thought; he must wash away the dust of travel, have his clothes and boots brushed and cleaned — at once, too. How could a gentleman sup with a lady, as he now was?

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When, nearly an hour later, Sir Michael descended to the parlor the curtains were drawn across the windows and the room was given over to candlelight and the glow of a fire, though without the world was still tolerably luminous under the sodden gray clouds. But "Mine Host" (I will adhere to that antiquated term) considered that things were more cheerful and more to the taste of his guests when curtains were drawn and logs lighted, even on summer's first day. Sir Michael entered, found the place empty of life, and turned to survey its contents.

They proved to be simple — the ordinary odds and ends of an inn parlor. A stout oak table and dresser, oak chairs stiff and upright, two arm-chairs boasting faded cushions and a settle — very antique. In a corner stood a long clock, near the window a fiddle-shaped weather-glass, on the walls hung a few prints, two warming-pans and a dim mirror. The room was by no means luxurious, and Michael wondered idly concerning the quality of the supper, the preparations for which were already displayed. A cloth covered the centre

table and bore on its white surface a plate, some bread-crumbs and a glass, at the bottom of which were left the bubbling dregs of beer. It appeared that the gentleman from Winterbourne had supped already.

Then, with a new thought in his mind Sir Michael smiled; whatever the quality it would be a supper *tête-à-tête*.

A waiting-maid entered and busied herself at the table arranging the places (there were two) and clearing away the remnants of a meal which that anomalous gentleman of Winterbourne had consumed. Sir Michael's eyes were looking into the fire; by an absurd fancy the flames brought to his mind a vision of the Unknown. He was, indeed, seeking for her face amid the coals and burning wood, when he heard behind him the echo of a footstep, the sound of an opening door, and the whisper of a woman's dress. In an instant he was on his feet and bowing.

She stood in the doorway, outlined against the darkness, bathed in the mellow light of candles. She was robed, as she had been yesterday, in moss-green, but she was hatless now and he could behold the full glory of her hair; it was drawn back lightly from the white brow and, falling on either side, framed the perfect contour of her face, while to her left shoulder fell a curling tendril.

Her head was held high, and there was a look of surprise in those gray eyes, a curl, a little disdainful, on the crimson lips. For a few moments she stood silent, one delicate hand at her throat, then she spoke.

"I fear, sir, that I am intruding. I was not aware that you were here — indeed, sir, I understood that I should be alone."

Her voice was a little imperious and compelling: it struck one that she could command, and yet she was a mere girl — twenty-two at most.

“Madam, I fear that it is I who intrude; but, alas, ’tis necessity. The landlord informed me on arrival that there was but one parlor for four guests.”

“Four?”

“So, madam, he told me. There is a gentleman from Winterbourne — if you know where that is you are wiser than I — another gentleman on his way to town who is already asleep — having captured a chill — yourself and — your humble servant.”

He bowed again, smiling, and then, as there was no response, continued:

“I can, of course, madam, take my supper in the kitchen — in the stable — (you may take my word for it he had no intention of doing either) if my presence inconveniences you, but I had thought that the landlord would have asked your permission —”

“This, sir, is the first that I have heard of you. Or, stay, there was a traveler who came, muffled to the eyes against the rain — I had forgot. Are you he?”

“You would have been clever indeed to have recognised in me the traveler who rapped at the door in a cloud of water.”

There was a pause, and the girl came forward. For a second she stood motionless by the table, then she gave a little gasp and clutched at the back of a chair. Michael wondered, as she smiled a little wanly; he had not noticed that a spurt of flame had leaped up and illumined his features.

“And now,” said he, “I will pull the bell and we will sup — that is if you have no objection?”

The Unknown glanced up quickly; a strange look was in her eyes, a look of doubt and something akin to fear Michael thought.

“Objection, sir, why should I object?” queried she.

But there was a shade of nervousness in the voice.

CHAPTER VII

TWO AT SUPPER

TO Sir Michael's mind the supper began disappointingly, for it seemed as if his companion were unwilling to speak; as if she merely tolerated his presence. To the few odd remarks — soulless things concerning weather, roads, and the like — she returned answers, civil enough, but not gracious; yet, in spite of her silence, her aloofness, she had lost that imperiousness with which she had met him. Indeed she now seemed a trifle timid, almost fearful; altogether a different creature from the girl — she was scarce a woman you must know — who had entered the parlor so short a time back. It was a little odd.

Then, as the meal wore on, Michael grew impatient with himself, irritable at his faint-heartedness. Was the golden opportunity to slip by unused? Here he had been afire with the knowledge that his Unknown was beneath the same roof as he, was to sup with him, and he was sitting mum as a Quaker!

With an inward resolve he decided that not another minute should pass before he again endeavored, and more persistently, to break down the barrier of silence. So, drinking a glass of claret to the determination, he turned boldly to the lady.

"It is a strange coincidence, madam," said he; "do you not think so?"

With something near a shudder — at any rate a

quiver of the nerves — she turned her back toward him.

“Coincidence, sir? I am at a loss —”

“It is to be pardoned. It is seldom that a woman remembers a man, as a man does a woman. Yet, I confess that, in this case, I thought that you had recollected; but I was mistaken — or, perhaps, you were.”

“Sir, I have little knowledge of your meaning — or of you.”

“Neither, madam, have I much of you; but I remember seeing a lady — as like you as a rose to its twin — in London so recently as yesterday, in the shop of one Mr. Horniman.”

With the raising of her brows the Unknown tried to show surprise, but her cheeks had flushed crimson.

“You are he who stood in the dark? your pardon, sir, I had —” She stopped — the lie would not pass the lips. Next she moved her hand to her brow as if in perplexity; it was boldly done, but her eyelids flickered; that showed the artifice.

“The same, madam.” Michael inclined his head.

“Your pardon, sir,” said she a little breathlessly.

Now he saw some little advantage.

“Madam, it is I who should ask grace for making a chance encounter excuse for conversation — without an introduction. But, by my faith, I do not care for supping and remaining dumb, do you?”

The frank question, the humor in his eyes, his boyishness disarmed her — the ice was broken. With a little laugh (how sweet it sounded!) she pushed back her chair; supper was finished.

“No, I admit that I do not, but I am accustomed to it; what we are used to often passes unheeded.”

The sentence done she rose and came toward the

dying fire; Michael followed her movements and placed a chair. She took it, blushing. It seemed that it was novelty for her to be waited on.

"Indeed, 'twas a trifle whimsical," began Sir Michael. "Two guests, chained by weather, feasting (pass the word) together and remaining silent, save for a couple of random remarks. Surely — do you believe in Fate? — it was a whim of that monstrous personage to whirl us on the self-same day from London, whirl us along the self-same road and cast us together here. It was a prank that one should not ignore, not dismiss with a nod; it was, indeed, to my mind, no prank, no chance, but Destiny."

He had begun to speak gaily, he ended with something of seriousness in word and expression.

"Why should Destiny concern herself with — with you and me?" asked the girl.

"Why not with us as with kings, princes, and popes?" said Michael. "It is more than chance that has brought us together — twice — between two sun-risings."

"Sir, you give things too much importance. We meet to-day, we met yesterday — in a shop. Think! you might have been any other man, I any other woman —"

"You might, madam, but — you were not. There lies the difference. It seems as if I, a derelict from London, was fore-ordained to meet someone not altogether a stranger. Know that I have left London despairing all things — even myself. All through this day I have been weary, sad, life was a gray monotony — now I meet you. You, who, yesterday, seemed an angel upon earth —"

"Sir!"

The little stifled exclamation arrested him, he drew back startled as he beheld the look in her eyes, the nervous clasp of her fingers.

"An angel!" she whispered beneath her breath. "An angel!"

The meagre glow from the fire beat up from the hearth to her face, her glance was bent to the floor. For a long while there was silence, while Michael wondered at her words. Then, with an effort, she raised her head, drew back a strand of hair that had wandered over her forehead, and faced him.

"You have left London disillusioned perhaps — there are many who do that I am told. Many who go light of heart and heavy of purse, who return light of purse and heavy of heart. For myself I know little of such things — little of London."

"You were there yesterday; had you been there long?"

"It depends, sir, on how you count time. Everyone, I believe, has his own timepiece."

"And yours? Was it quick or slow?"

"It seemed I had two; one crawled as a plough horse, the other galloped like a hunter — I lived by both. I will say no more; to me it was a month, a week, a minute — I cannot tell you which. To me it was painful, delicious, hideous, beautiful; but to-day, when I was on the road, was more beautiful — I left town betimes you must know. And to-morrow will be beautiful and —"

She finished, so Michael questioned.

"You travel far?"

"Not so far as I have come," returned she. "And now, sir, you know all of me that you ever will; I wish to know of you."

"You wish it? It is a dreary story." So said Sir

Michael, but, as he spoke, he knew not how or why, a smile hovered at his mouth. Was it as dreary as he had imagined it, was it as miserable? Who was Clothilde Chamby beside this glorious creature? Who was she to compare with one strand of that magic hair?

"Is yours so sad? so, too, is mine — the rest of it that you will never know." A moment back she was smiling, a dimple fluctuating at her chin, now her eyes shadowed, her hand fell wearily at her side.

"Shall I speak?"

"Yes — if you will," said she absently. He glanced up quickly. "But first, when did you leave London?"

"To-day."

"You have come faster than I."

"I have done much to-day, already."

"Much?" she questioned, but her thoughts were elsewhere. Can you picture her? The sweetness of face, the beauty of form, the sorrow — the hidden sorrow — at her brow?

"I have played, I have drank, I have fought; I have — loved!"

"Sir, you are a man of many accomplishments."

"Say rather that I am a man of many faults — many tricks. Fighting, drinking, gambling — tricks all, alluring till they are learnt then —"

He spread out his hands.

"So is Life a trick; but one never to be learned — till Death." She sighed.

"You think that?"

For a little she did not answer; in the silence they could hear each other's breathing. Presently she spoke.

"Yes, for me a trick weary in the learning — and you? No, we will speak nothing more of life. I am no philosopher — is that the word? Believe me I am ig-

norant, doomed to live solitary in the country; hidden by smooth hills from the world; nursed by green trees; birds and flowers my friends. Tell me of London, I lived there once — tell me of the world, what men and women say and think."

There was a subtle command in her voice. For a moment the sadness of her look had faded; she was eager for knowledge, eager for a glimpse, even through another's eyes, of the world.

"You say that to-day you have fought, 'twas for a lady, I dare swear. Yes, I have a little knowledge; but I read books, not life. Now tell me of the duel."

Sir Michael had been fingering his snuff-box, at her words he shut it with a snap.

"In truth 'twas for a lady, a lady of the town —"

"Her name, sir?" She had the imperiousness of a child.

"Clothilde."

The girl raised her lashes.

"French then?"

"I confess it."

"Is it a matter of confession? . . . But the sequel, the duel, who was your opponent, a swarthy Italian, a —"

"Nay, madam, 'twas a beardless boy."

"And — you killed him?"

"No, no, I gave him a scratch. Pricked him as a thorn would your finger."

"'Twas rapiers then. I think 'tis easier to wound lightly with them than with pistols."

"You are well-informed, 'tis indeed easier." Michael was a bit surprised. "As it was I drew a spot or two of blood and we — like fools or wise men, I know not which — were satisfied."

"And the lady, sir? What of her?"

"I know not."

"Ah!" The girl's eyes were alight with interest, but, unlike most women, she wanted to hear no more of Clothilde. "So that is the story of the duel — it has nothing of the romance in it that one expects. But you have awakened my curiosity, tell me more of these things, more of the great world of which I know so little — and what I do know is wrong, distorted, I think. . . . But you said that last night you played — you lost?"

"By a miracle, I won."

"Ah!"

She drew back her head and looked at him fully; there was still the glow in her eyes and more now — a look of eagerness; also a suspicion of fear. Michael construed that she was eager for more knowledge of the unknown wonder world, yet fearful that her questionings were indiscreet.

"I won not much as play goes now," continued Sir Michael, "yet enough to line my waistcoat."

"Line your waistcoat?"

"Yes; listen!"

With a gesture, impulsive I think, Michael put his hand to his bosom; there came the crisp rustle of notes and the faint click of metal. At the sound the girl started and lowered her gaze.

"But, sir — 'tis not safe!"

"Not safe? Why not — who should know?"

"'Tis not a question of knowledge, but of chance. A robber, a highwayman, does not wait to ascertain if the traveler has his pockets stuffed with gold or notes, or if my lady carries great pearls. 'Tis chance with him; sometimes he draws blank, sometimes he is re-

warded. Believe me, I know — we hear much of these things; Wilts is a prey for robbers. Even now, since more than a year, we have been quaking with stories of Wild Will — a highwayman of notoriety. Perhaps you have heard of him?”

Michael was musing.

“Yes, I fancy some echo of his name has reached even to London. But why should I fear, riding by daylight, with a servant? Besides, I have but prated of my money to you. I do not fancy you are his accomplice!”

Michael laughed, and he expected the Unknown to mingle her laugh with his; but she only smiled — very wanly.

“No, I am not — his accomplice.” For a moment she fell silent as if thinking, then continued. “Daylight, I assure you, is little protection; only three months since a gentleman from here was robbed on the Shaftesbury road at staring noon; and a servant is as terrified of a black mask and pistol as of a ghost. Remember, I live within the shadow of Wild Will’s reputation. Believe me, he is a daring fellow, much admired for his bravery among women.”

“Do you find yourself among his admirers?”

“Certainly; why not?” She said it defiantly without an added tinge of color in her cheek.

“That is for you to judge,” Michael laughed as he spoke — he was very glad. Had she not said that she lived within the shadow of this rascal’s reputation? With this knowledge he could track her, seek her out — that thought heartened him. “You have let out your secret; you live near?”

“I — I —” she stammered, prettily, in embarrassment.

"Yes, you have told me."

"If I have — what matter? We shall never meet again; you talked of destiny and chance, but if it was chance that brought us together, it will be destiny that parts us. I journey westward and halt not far, it is true, you —"

"Also west, to Exeter — and beyond."

"To Exeter? Along the Shaston road then, I warn you guard your goods. Wild Will rides there."

Michael laughed.

"Egad, madam, Wild Will may frighten women and flunkeys, but for me in daylight, with a servant —"

"You have heard the tale of the Sherborne coach?"

"No."

"Nor that concerning Lord Mitton?"

"Neither that."

"Nor the others doubtless, but there are others — that I assure you." She rose from the chair and stood before him, the candlelight full on her features. She spoke again, a little abruptly. "But I will say no more. Good-night."

With a curtesy she moved across the room; Michael followed. At the door, finger on the latch, he spoke again.

"Perhaps, madam, after these sinister warnings you will permit me to accompany you. I am at your service."

She bowed to him stiffly.

"Thank you, sir, I have my maid; besides Wild Will will not disturb me — he is courteous to women!"

But now the door was open, and without other words she swept through, her carriage as upright as when she had entered. So she mounted the stairs, head erect, eyes straight, her hand lifting the moss-green skirt from

her feet; and so she vanished from Sir Michael's sight; but in her room, the door shut behind her, she threw herself sobbing on the bed.

"O God," she whispered, "forgive me, he called me angel!"

CHAPTER VIII

MUSINGS DURING A THUNDERSTORM

SIR MICHAEL, after an indefinite period of wakeful tossings, of heart-burnings and longings — with, in fact, all the agitation of a lover — fell into a deep slumber. A slumber which lasted through the clarion of an impetuous cockerel, and far beyond the arrival of day; even beyond the uprising of the inn household, until, indeed, ten of the clock. At that hour he awoke with a start.

So heavily had he slept that every sound, every movement of the morning, had escaped him. He was completely unaware that the gentleman from Winterbourne had taken his departure, and that the Unknown had at eight o'clock — and rather earlier if anything — set out in her chaise along with her maid or duenna — call her what you will; an ancient wrinkled creature on whose frail limbs hung a faded gown of drab sarcenet.

Being unaware of these facts Sir Michael was moderately content as he lay snug in the pillows of a feather-bed and surveyed the room; deciding that the pink curtains gave a pleasant, restful light. Then, happening to glance at his watch — a handsome one which lay at his head — Sir Michael uttered an exclamation of astonishment and, leaping out of bed, he tugged at the bell-rope.

Ten o'clock! Heavens! The hour at which he habitually rose seemed terrible in its lateness. Why

had he not given Pierre orders to awaken him earlier? Then he remembered that he had gone up to his room alone and, having shut and bolted the door, had sat down solitary with his thoughts and his emotions. His brain had been full of the fellow-guest with whom he had supped — the nameless, the unknown, the mysterious. He had expected — not unwillingly, I fancy — that the night would be sleepless; he had imagined that at sunrise he would be up pacing the downs, gazing at her window, plunged in melancholy; and, instead, he had slept soundly during seven or eight hours — a fact which demonstrates that, though perhaps in love, he was not frantic from that strange passion. But the spark burnt brightly; the fire was kindling.

He strolled to the window and pulled back the curtain; without the world looked dull-green and hazy. It was a breathless morning after the rain, the air was moistly warm to the cheek; no breeze stirred the leaves of the stunted elms that cleave around the "Hut"; on every side the downs rippled away in smooth, swelling curves, spattered frequently with junipers. Each blade of grass stood motionless, every wild-flower was still, even the hair-bells hung quiet on their frail stems; the sky was of a slate-blue, very faint at the horizon; the sun was as a lamp set behind thick gauze. It was a heavy day, brooding with thunder — anon smoky clouds with crumbling edges would come up from the west.

A knock sounded on the door; Sir Michael pulled back the bolt and Pierre entered. He carried a jug of hot water and a cup of chocolate.

"Tell me," said Sir Michael, "the hour!"

Like all of us, he wished for the confirmation of an unpleasant knowledge.

"Ten o'clock, sir."

"The deuce it is, and — er — a fine morning?"

"Indeed, sir, yes, with thunder in the air."

"Ah! and the inn?"

"The inn, sir?"

"Not the inn — no, no, its occupants. For example, is the lady in the post chaise gone?"

"These two hours, sir."

"Two hours!"

With a sigh Michael flung himself into a chair. What cursed luck! Luck, too, for which there was no one to curse but himself — and self-accusation is seldom comforting. Poor Pierre was blameless.

"They were betimes," mused Sir Michael over his chocolate.

"Indeed, sir, yes."

"They must have far to travel."

"I think not, sir, but I could learn little. The post-boy told me that he was a hired man from Shaftesbury, and that Mistress Julia —"

"Julia!"

Michael laid down his cup scarcely sipped at.

"Yes, sir, the lady is Mistress Julia Vane living in great retirement with her father at the Manor of Fovant-Chamberlayne."

"Fovant-Chamberlayne! Where is that?"

"Midway, so far as I could understand, between Wilton and Shaftesbury."

"Ah! at the Manor! You learned no more?"

"Little else, but they seem poor outwardly though 'tis said that old Vane —"

"Old Vane!" cried Sir Michael impetuously. "They say Mr. Vane is —"

"They say, sir (with your pardon), that he is a miser."

"A miser — hum — and is that all?"

"Yes, sir."

"You did not learn why they start so early, to travel so near?"

"It seems that Mistress Vane is afraid of robbers. There is a great rascal hereabouts — one Wild Will."

"She fear Wild Will!" Michael exclaimed involuntarily. Certainly he had received a different impression last night; but with women, who could say? Might she not have wished to appear brave, or perhaps her maid — he knew the terror of domestics — had been the fearful one.

But the motive of her going was nothing, set aside the fact of her departure. Michael knew only and cared only that she had vanished — along that high soaring road, over the brow of that hill — whilst he had been snoring abed. What should he do? Last night he had hoped that Chance or Destiny (how the words came back), who twice had carried them together, would again help him. At least he imagined that they would meet that morning; that, perhaps he might again offer to accompany the chaise, to guard her against this Wild Will. And now, the tool which he had thought to use was, in a manner, turned against him.

He sat musing on the bed, while Pierre busied himself in the room. It was mysterious, certainly; an old Manor, the father a miser, the daughter, beautiful as a goddess, journeying hurriedly to London. Surely he had stumbled across some romance? To him it was a thing of wonder, of hidden interest — at the least it was a worthy distraction to ease him of his spleen and his passion. Oh, yes, the fire was kindling, at every instant. Julia, Julia — how the name echoed!

Some minutes had passed, and Pierre was at the door waiting for commands. On the spur of the moment Michael decided.

"Tell the landlord to prepare a breakfast in the parlor; at noon we will start for Shaftesbury."

"No further, sir?"

"No further. At Shaftesbury we shall remain — I have business there. Remember no word to any one."

And now you will see that, within this space of a handful of minutes, things had advanced — the logs were blazing. It was baffled hopes, the clear check, that had done it, I fancy; for Sir Michael was a gentleman of impulse, a man who cared that no one should gainsay him. Hence in a measure the poignancy of his scene with Clothilde Chamby.

Always sensitive, impressionable, this odd information that Pierre had culled, awoke his curiosity, his chivalry, his desires. He recalled again the strange fluctuation in Mistress Vane's moods; the looks of fear, the hauteur, the almost childish pleasure that she had taken in the conversation — there was something entirely foreign in her from other women. It was a discovery in temperament, and behind there was surely some secret, some danger, some distress; perhaps he could help this wondrous being. Heaven grant he might!

So had run his thoughts, chasing each other in their haste to reach the final decision. And now everything was clear, decided; he would ride to Shaftesbury and there remain and, from thence, endeavor, strive, do what was possible to help Mistress Julia. He would find her — ye gods he must find her! — see her, speak to her — love her. He went to the window and glanced out; there, before his eyes, was the road that she had

traveled; there, it wound its white ribbon over the green shoulder of the down. He would follow along that road — to the end of England if need were.

By twelve o'clock Sir Michael and Pierre were on the road, trotting their horses up the hills which surround this derelict inn. The air was oppressive; without doubt thunder was brooding. Affirmation of their suspicions came quickly; as they topped a long steep slope they saw, low down in the west, crumbling masses of smoke-gray cloud. As on the previous afternoon, a storm was bound to come, without a wetting it would be impossible to travel far. It was lucky, decided Sir Michael, that they were to dine at Salisbury.

After all, there was no imminent need of haste, there was time even for a lover — an impetuous first-sight lover — things would have to march slowly at first. It was obviously impossible for Sir Michael to ride up to the Manor of Fovant-Chamberlayne to demand of a miser his daughter as wife — and she had to be taken into the question. There were, alas! many “ifs” to be reckoned with.

They sighted the Cathedral spire of Salisbury from afar — a gray needle pointing up to the gathering clouds — while two miles from the city they heard the first grumble of the storm; they saw it working up above the smooth hills and crowded woods that lead to the vale.

Michael spurred up the last hill and rode swift to the brink of the town. As they trotted down the streets — narrow, antique with many jutting-gables, bottle-glassed windows and leaning eaves — memories flashed into his mind. He remembered the first time that he had passed these houses, when as a youth he came riding from the west; free, eager for the great world, old

sweet Devon (in his mind dull as a gravestone) left behind.

At the George Inn — an ancient affair set in the High Street — he dismounted, ordered a private room, dinner, and wine. As he entered the little parlor — oak-paneled and austere — the primary flash of lightning gashed the clouds, and the thunder echoed heavily. The storm was come; out in the street the townsfolk were scurrying for refuge; Sir Michael watched amusedly. He saw carts and waggons, jolly farmers, a stout cleric waddling swift as his bulk would permit toward the Cathedral Close, followed by an imperious dame in a sedan borne by flunkeys in faded liveries; county folk; errand boys; a handsome woman on a good horse — all were hurrying for a roof with which to cheat the imminent rain.

How different from London; a little *bourgeois* maybe — but charming! Even the air, though heavy with thunder, was sweet to his nostrils, even in the cobbled streets one seemed to know that trees and flowers were breathing near. And the drama of those streets! No beggars or ruffians, no howling street hawkers, no pale-faced city-dwellers. The people were pink-cheeked, healthy country-folk; for society a fussy cleric and his faded wife, living in hallowed peace under the shadow of the Cathedral. Different indeed from the painted, scented women of fashion!

'And here let me beg that you will pardon Sir Michael's short-sightedness, his making an example of the whole, being blind to faults, long-sighted in regard to virtues. A man has no sense of proportion when he is in love.

By the time his dinner was served and Sir Michael had eaten two mouthfuls, the storm had come. It began with the hollow moan of wind, with the rush of its ap-

proach and then, the herald having passed, came the thunder, throbbing accompaniment to the glare of lightning. And next, after a minute's space of suspense — a pause of Nature — one heard the rattle of rain on the windows, the splash on the cobbles, its song as it poured on the wrinkled roofs.

All the afternoon the elements strove, now in the full madness of battle, now skirmishing away to the hills, now coming to a fleeting truce before rushing madly together again on the battlefield of clouds. Rain fell, too; a fierce rain, falling straight as tiny spears from the clouds, but so thick that the gray shape of the Cathedral was masked by the curtain of down-rushing water. Michael, in the little parlor, found it difficult to think that it was June time, that now it was, when the country should thrill beneath the kisses of sunshine, throb with the song of birds. So dreary, indeed, did it seem that he had pulled the bell to summon Pierre and tell him that they would stay the night in Salisbury when a cascade of sunshine fell through the clouds. The light called him to the window, he opened it and leaned out. The air smelt fresh, the sunlight strengthened (above was a heart-shaped patch of azure), from a hidden garden came the call of a thrush.

"Sir?" 'Twas Pierre who spoke — diffidently.

"The horses saddled, quick as you may," said Michael; "I ride to Shaftesbury."

CHAPTER IX

MR. VANE IS INTRODUCED

THE village of Fovant-Chamberlayne lies prone, as it were, in the valley, hunched between two knolls that rise on either side, clothed to the tips with fir, beech, and oak. It is, in a manner, set in a valley within a valley, for immediately on either hand are these two wooded knolls — approximately east and west — while to the south is the great rampart of the downs sweeping horizontally across the landscape in smooth green curves, broken rarely by a patch of low trees, and, once, with the dips and lines of a Roman encampment; while, away to the north, and unseen from the village, the land flows upward to the long verdant hem of Grovely Woods.

The village, though in reality but a small affair, covered in Sir Michael's day a certain amount of space; it straggled, indeed, nearly half a mile at the base of its own small valley. At the southern end — the end nearest, but by no means immediate, to the great barrier of the downs — was the "Fovant Arms," an inn comfortable in appearance, ample in size, and excellent in reputation. One might, indeed, have considered the hostelry too commodious for its position, but for the fact that it was the only place — worthy of mention, that is — between Wilton and Shaftesbury. And although, in those days, the great road went edging along the curve of the hills, there were many who traveled by the valley roads;

there were others, too, who descended from the hills to eat and drink, sometimes even to sleep, at the "Fovant Arms."

Next in the village — for the inn was the first dwelling — came a bevy of cream-washed cottages, with low, honey-hued roofs, their windows half-smothered with roses, jasmine and trails of tenacious ivy. Before every garden gateway was a narrow bridge, crossing a thread-like stream, whose water ran clear as a mirror; so clear that one might see the reddish brown gravel, chalk-knobs and waving locks of water-weed, as specimens behind a glass.

Beyond these again — the village, you must know, went in gradations — was a farm-house and a church; the latter, squat-towered and cruciform, gave one the idea of a hen guarding her eggs — the tombstones will do for the eggs — set in a nest of elms. Near by stood the rectory; and, further still from the downs, the village ended in the high imperious wall and great gateway of Fovant Manor.

From the roadway — here little more than a lane — nothing could be seen but the higher branches of great elms and sycamores, the tips of rounded oaks, and, afar, the gray fingers of chimney-stacks shooting through the greenery. The drive that led away from the griffon-guarded gates showed you nothing more — only its own stretch of weed-mottled earth, winding through a thicket of shrubs. From this you will understand that a stranger saw little of the Manor.

Within the house — the exterior of which I have now no time to describe — in a medium-sized room at the northeast corner, blazed a great fire on an open hearth; beside it was seated the figure — a strange figure, too — of a man,

Old Andrew Vane had on his knees an ancient book, but the covers were closed, and his glance fixed on the flaming logs; his lips mumbled unintelligible words.

Though still distant by some years from "three score and ten," the man appeared completely old; indeed, the signs of age had been drawn indelibly on his features long since. The thin face finished in a cadaverous jaw that showed the contour of the skull beneath the meagre flesh; the cheek bones were high and came forward sharply, making a ledge beneath the dark orbs of his eyes; above, his brows — black still as a stag-beetle's antennæ — ran together in two curves, while, midway in this strange mask, hung a nose, thin as a file, but ruby with drink. His whole countenance (the harsh eyes, the rapacious mouth, the sneering lines at its corners) declared a nature insufferably mean and cruel; there was avarice, heartlessness in every inch of flesh. It was a face to be abhorred.

The old man, as he sat before the fire, was dressed in a dingy suit of black satin, stained and grimy with spilt snuff. His thin shanks were in stockings darned and patched, his feet thrust into a pair of square-toed shoes — long since out of date — and his shoulders were wrapped round with a faded mauve dressing-robe — antique but still *in toto*. In one of his claw-like hands was an ebony cane minus a ferule; on his head a velvet cap moss-green with age, that passably hid the expanse of his cranium — he was bald as an egg, by the way.

The room, although the hour was not beyond noon, was gloomy, for one of its two windows was completely overshadowed by an impenetrable barrier of yews, while the other window, facing east, caught only the primary rays of the sun. It is not to be wondered at, then,

that the room, dark with old oak and unblessed by sunshine, should need the light and comfort of a fire even though June was in; and old Vane cared considerably for warmth, although he had chosen this dingy apartment for his abode. It was, however, rarely that he sat here, living chiefly in the vast hall of the Manor; only when his daughter was absent did he come to this lair — like some hibernating beast seeking darkness.

Presently the strange figure rose from his chair, and moving to the windows began to tap petulantly on the panes with his bony fingers.

“’Od’s life!” he muttered, “the girl should be here. Five days to make a journey and fulfil a commission should be enough for a toper who baited at every inn and drink-house between here and town — if he had a moderate firm head. I could — yes, and have a double dose at each; but then I’m not so feather-pated as some. But the girl — Zounds! she should be here by now. To-day is Saturday and she went Tuesday — that is five days. Tuesday, Wednesday —”

So muttering, the old creature walked up and down on the bare boards, tapping his cane in front of him, though not so much from infirmity as from petulance. Then, after six turns, he stopped abruptly near a bell-rope, which hung by the chimney, and pulled. With a screech of tearing cloth it fell down on to his arm; an oath came from his lips and he was about to throw the thing into the fire when he paused, surveyed the tattered stuff, and laid it on the table.

“I suppose the cursed thing can be mended,” he said laconically, and took a pinch of snuff. But it was not philosophy which had prompted him to the act — it was the spirit of the miser.

Then he recollected that there was no one in the

house; that it was empty but for himself. Had not old Jane Smith gone to London with her mistress? Of course; had he not during the last five days been compelled to find his own food, make his own bed, light the fires? Yet there was one advantage in all this — the excuse for more drink; with little food, was it to be wondered at that he should need more liquor? It was one thing to kill and cook a chicken, quite another to descend to the cellar, with large key and wavering candle, and fetch bottles of ruby wine. What did he want with food?

And now he had forgotten and rang the bell for old Jane so that he might ask — by dumb show you must know — if Mistress Julia was returned; ask this, when Jane was with Julia, somewhere between Fovant-Chamberlayne and London. Pah! it was a sign of infirmity, of age, he was getting old he muttered to himself, as he shuffled again towards the window. He had not thought that drink was weakening his brain, as indeed why should he? One does not execrate, or lay mischief at the feet of, a beloved mistress.

Before his eyes, as he stared between the stone mulions, lay the garden, and beyond a field sloping downwards to a willow and alder-fringed lake. The garden — unkempt, weed-chained, grass-grown under the sullen countenance of the sky — appeared gloomy and desolate, a fitting frame for the old house with its group of black windows staring from the ivied walls. For some little time the old man surveyed dispassionately the scene before him; the terrace with its lichen-frosted balustrade and crumbling steps, a broken urn, tangled rose-bushes, blots and splashes of weed; then his eyes wandered to the lake. The first time, for many years, a shadow of remorse was over him, his soul seemed mo-

mentarily weighted, his heart sighed at the desolation and ruin of the world around him — his own small world of which, in a manner, he was god.

Two opposites, two extremes, had wrought the damage; turned the Manor into a shell of echoing rooms, the garden into a wilderness — prodigality and parsimony. In his mind he retraced his footsteps through the years — it was a path tortuous and bizarre. Days, incidents, persons, rose up before him, mocked, jeered, pitied. . . . His thoughts went back to long-ago times; he was overwhelmed with recollections, some of which were of a reality almost tangible, others strangely remote. Lonely, menacing, evil-faced as he was, for the moment his features were touched with something almost gentle. Can you see him?

Then, breaking in upon his reverie, came the sound of horses' hoofs and the rolling scrunch of wheels. It was Julia returned! On the instant the expression changed, the tenderness departed from the bleary eyes, the lines of thought — remorse perhaps — vanished from the mouth; there was greed now in the eyes. Abruptly he turned from the window and moved quickly as was possible — he was chained stiff with gout — across the floor. Then, leaning heavily on his stick, he opened the door and hobbled out into the hall. Slowly the crumpled figure shuffled across the boards, his eyes wandering up at the walls, black with raven oak and hung with half a dozen or so portraits; now scarcely to be seen, for the light filtered through rainbow-stained windows narrow and deep set.

Someone was knocking at the great door, a little impatiently, thought old Vane, and at any other time it is certain that he would have kept the knocker waiting, but now he was anxious, keen to hear of the journey.

to London. So, with fumbling fingers, he inserted a key in the lock of the door and wrenched it open. As the panel swung back the wind rushed in gustily, bearing a spatter of rain; it made the tails of his dressing-gown flap grotesquely, and caught his breath in a sneeze.

Julia and the old servant were standing on the steps endeavoring to gain shelter from the rain beneath the projecting cornice of the roof; beside them was a box and a bag. The chaise had already disappeared down the weed-choked drive, the post-boy knowing well that he would get no shelter at Fovant Manor; he would be paid, and that was all.

"Come, Julia, come, you are late — late. I expected you last night — hours since," cried old Vane querulously. "What have you been doing, girl, all these days, what is the news, quick, quick; has there been danger?"

Julia, who was helping Jane drag in the box, did not pause.

"No, there has been no danger. The news is good."

But her face was bent; her father could not see the flush that came to her cheeks.

CHAPTER X

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

THE box having been pulled into the hall and the door shut and barred, old Vane turned impatiently to Julia. His hands were quivering with excitement; there were gleams of fire — evil fire — in his deep fixed eyes.

“Are you ready, girl?” he croaked. “Come quickly — quickly. Am I to be kept all day — the news? — the news? Here, into this room; there is a fire. I don’t like the hall when I am alone; no, no — the portraits stare!”

He was at the door of his own gloomy apartment, beckoning with a long finger. In the dark of the house, with the thunder pealing without, he was a grotesque, almost a horrible, figure; a shiver passed over Julia as she crossed the hall and followed him into the further room. At the threshold she paused to take in the disorder and grime of it. On the table were the littered remains of half a dozen meals — the bones of a chicken, a fragment of a pie, a triangle of yellow cheese and a slice of bread; mixed with this were two apples, a couple of pipes, numerous bottles; glasses empty and reeking, a little mound of wine-sodden snuff and a dusty book. In one corner of the room were more bottles — a little crowd black and sinister. The fumes of stale wine and tobacco were pungent.

After a quick surveyal of the room Julia crossed to the fire; it seemed the only wholesome object there.

Her father was again seated on the chair, his querulous hands stretched forward.

“And now,” cried he, “give me the money — give me the money. Quick, tell me how much you have brought, there must be more than last time, I tell you.”

As Julia stood before him she was searching in the folds of her cloak. There was anxiety expressed in the lines of her face; a little fear — or something akin — was visible — or, perhaps, I should call it a shrinking; it was as if some dainty animal feared physical punishment. For a moment she searched, then drew from beneath her cloak — where it had lain in a cunningly placed pocket — a leather bag, tied at the throat by a knot of black ribbon.

With a gurgle of excitement the miser leaned forward from his chair to clutch at the object, but Julia held it from him.

“Wait,” said she a little hesitatingly. “Let me tell you first what I did; you can count afterward. You may be disappointed, but I could get no more. As you bade me I went to Mr. Horniman with the jewels, and accepted what he offered. I am sorry if you don’t think it enough — I did my best. Shall I tell you the amount or will you count?”

“Count — count; give it to me.”

She had spoken wearily, without life, without emotion; seeming, in a measure, to excuse herself, yet listless as to the result. Now she handed him the bag and seated herself on a little stool; she was wondering — as often she had wondered before — why her father desired not to be told the sum, but to count it coin by coin. Meanwhile the old man moved eagerly to the table and emptied the contents of the bag on to the wood — a shatter of gold and notes; then he began

feverishly to count, mumbling continually to himself. Julia watched him listlessly — as if witnessing a many times repeated performance — as he fingered the gold; passing it lovingly between his fingers, holding the notes to his old ears so that he might hear the crackle, throwing a coin on the table to know if it rang true, biting another between his yellow teeth. Then — having fingered, examined and approved the quality, if not the quantity, of the money — he counted through the notes and shuffled them together.

“Two hundred!” he muttered, “two hundred!”

He spoke excitedly as if amazed at the sum, as if eager to burst forth angrily, only restrained by the little golden discs that ran through his fingers as he piled them in minute towers. Soon he stopped; there were six squat towers of gold. For a moment he looked at them fixedly, almost fiercely, then shuffled round till he faced Julia.

He was shaking, his brow knotted, his lips trembling with fury.

“Julia,” he cried hoarsely, “what does this mean? Two hundred and sixty pounds! No more — you must be mad. Speak, girl, speak.”

Julia rose; she stood before him calm as untrod snow — her cheeks almost as white.

“No, that is the truth; two hundred and sixty pounds — that is all. I could get no more. Remember, father, you told me to be cautious, to go nowhere else than to Mr. Horniman.”

“Only — only this for those jewels — the necklace, the watch, two brooches, a diamond ring, a pearl ring, a ruby ring — the buckles! All that, and you bring back two hundred and sixty pounds — there should be

four hundred, I swear. Do you think, girl, that I am to be balked, to be cheated, after the risk, the expense, the anxiety of your journey to London? 'Od's life, you did not exert yourself, you did not bargain — two hundred and sixty pounds! Faugh, 'tis clean absurd! Speak — tell me the truth."

"I have told you the truth; there is nothing more to be said. There is all the money for the jewels that I went to London to sell."

She spoke quietly, collectedly, although old Vane was within a yard of her, pale with rage; his clutched hands trembling, his knees quivering. In a measure she had expected this.

"You have nothing more to say?" Fiercely.

"Nothing."

"You obtained no more money,—you have kept nothing back?"

"No, father."

"Then you lie," hissed the old man.

Julia's cheeks flushed crimson, as, for a moment, she stood there; then quietly she crossed to the window. Behind her she heard her father muttering, his shuffling movements, the noise of money; before her eyes the rain slashed the panes, falling in a curtain of moisture down the glass. Once or twice she saw the distant flash of lightning.

For a long while neither spoke. Julia remained motionless at the casement, Mr. Vane stood by the table rustling in one hand the notes and in the other grasping the ebony knob of his cane. He seemed to be calculating, for his lips moved; then, abruptly, he ceased and tottered across the room. Julia felt his fingers plucking at her sleeve.

"Yes," said Julia without turning. The calmness acted as a stimulant.

"I say again — you lie. You have secreted some of the money; kept it from me — for yourself. This is impossible, otherwise. Think, there were two necklaces — a diamond star —"

"That was the only piece of real value."

"A ruby ring."

"'Twas no ruby; Mr. Horniman called it — 'amardine.'"

"Pooh, girl! You add lie to lie, false to false, deception to deception. Do you think that I shall permit this, permit myself to be defied and robbed by my own brat? Do you —"

He ceased abruptly. Julia had turned round, she was facing him straight.

"I have not lied," she said, her voice clear and chill. "That is the sum which I received for the jewels. I could obtain no more — for the most part, I tell you, they were worthless. The diamond brooch was valued at a hundred and twenty guineas — the necklace at fifty — the other money was for the rest. I tell you the ruby was an amardine, the buckles —"

"Enough — enough. Do you think that I shall listen to a string of excuses, to be satisfied with a yard of lies — obvious, palpable lies? Do you think that I shall accept them? No, give me the rest of the money, now — there should, there must, be another two hundred — or — or you marry Dan Bulstrode."

He was menacing her not only with his eyes but with his stick; he was standing before her, the stick raised; he was tortured with rage. At his last words the girl had shivered slightly, then she laughed — a shallow, false laugh.

"Ah, the old threat," she said — the words came with difficulty.

"Ah, the old threat! yes — but still a good one. You tremble at it notwithstanding its antiquity."

That struck. It was true; the threat was still deadly. For a little she was silent; a vision of Daniel Bulstrode, coarse, drunken, brutal, sprang to her mind — then she spoke.

"You would break faith? Have you forgotten? Nine months it is ago now, you promised — you swore — that I should never again hear his name mentioned as a husband if I did all that you wished. Have I failed?"

"Yes, yes, you have failed before now and, this time, you have lied. Go — get the gold. Shall I be mocked, duped by you? Give me the money or, by Heaven, Bulstrode has you as his wife."

With a gasp he clutched at his throat, and fell backward into a chair; he was choking, overcome with his passion; the veins of his forehead stood out in blue tangles, his hands clasped vehemently the knob of his stick. The room was in silence; the storm was throbbing away along the hills. And Julia? she was standing rigid — stricken — powerless. Her head was bowed to her bosom, shaded by the glorious mass of her hair; her heart sped quickly. Many minutes had passed before she slowly moved to the door. The sound of her footsteps made Vane turn.

"Good — good; so you go to fetch the money?"

She paused hesitating.

"No, I fetch no money — there is no more. I have given you all — the full price of the jewels — the stolen jewels."

A snarl came to the old man's lips.

“ Oh, you are obstinate still. Well, well you know the consequences — you have broken your word — you have disobeyed, you have lied. What the devil good are you? Next time I will send another messenger to London. I didn’t make a criminal of you for nothing; I didn’t risk the hangman’s noose for lies; it was for gold — gold — yellow, rippling gold. D’you understand? ”

With a deep indraw of breath Mr. Vane rose wearily from his chair. As he did so the door closed; Julia was gone.

For a moment he stood there quivering in every limb, then, tottering to the table, he poured out a bumper of wine. Bowing slowly, solemnly to the little heap of guineas, he held up the glass.

“ Hail, hail to thee, O Plutos,” he cried, and drank.



"HAIL, HAIL TO THEE, O PLUTOS," HE CRIED.

CHAPTER XI

DISCLOSES JULIA'S SECRET

AND here let me tell you straightway, without preface, the secret of Julia Vane.

Know, then, that Julia Vane (Sir Michael's Unknown and our heroine) is one and the same with that daring — but, as yet somewhat visionary — rascal Wild Will.

And now, I ask you, do you think the less of her for it; does her beauty become impaired; does her character seem infected? You are short-sighted if that is the case. No, do not judge till you have heard her story; I trow that you will have compassion and admiration then. Compassion for her in the matter of surroundings; admiration for her daring, her fortitude — for the incomparable blending of charm and bravery, of winsomeness and determination. Now to her story.

For many years Andrew Vane had been kept at Fovant-Chamberlayne with his father, but when the latter had at length expired of an apoplexy he left to his son — then a dapper man of five-and-thirty — all his wealth to do with it as he willed. Promptly Mr. Andrew had willed to see the world and, no decent interval having elapsed, had set off post-haste to London; his pockets full of guineas and — for a wonder — his head full of brains.

In that city, with two or three trips to the continent, he spent ten years of enjoyment and extravagance, the principal feature of which was his phenomenal luck at

play. At the end of a decade of pleasure (really it sounds quite Roman) he married one Marion Scanlon, the daughter of a penniless Scotch baronet, who was glad enough to get rid of his daughter — she was but an expensive encumbrance — to the wealthy and flashy Mr. Vane. But she — a frail, beautiful reed of a woman — after two years of misery breathed her last breath as her child — our Julia — breathed her first.

“Poor soul; so young!” murmured her relatives beyond the Border. “Thank Heavens; she has been released from torture,” said her friends in town. That was true; it was indeed a release for, though, in the future, she might have had the comfort of her child, pain would have been added to pain as she saw that child growing beneath the influence of her husband.

As it was, the fate of Julia was to be brought up with her father under the care of a dour-faced nurse in the heart of London. In extreme youth — that is, we will say, till she was eleven — this did not so much matter; her father, after his fashion, was kind; the dour-visaged nurse, in her way, agreeable; the other servants indulgent. So far good — or at least fair — but as age advances one comes more in communion with, and one is more swayed by, immediate influences; the atmosphere in which one lives can more easily mould the character. Julia’s atmosphere was unhealthy, unsound, despicable.

Her father’s companions were none of the choicest, his mode of life by no means blameless: no wonder, then, the taint of his doings permeated into the air of the kitchen, a place in which Julia principally found herself when free from the lax care of her tutors — Mr. Power and Monsieur d’Antin. In such surroundings, among the servants or with her father and his friends,

with no one to point the difference between those remarkable sign-posts Right and Wrong, it is a wonder she did not grow up a minx or a vixen — if not worse. At one moment petted, coaxed, loaded with sweetmeats and toys; the next moment cursed at and cuffed; with no examples but bad ones; with no childish ideals, with no true feminine influence, it was instinct — the inherent, splendid instinct of her mother, poor Marion Scanlon — which kept her, through these years, a child pure and radiant.

Then, when she was nearly seventeen — a lovely girl, ripening quickly to woman — Andrew Vane had run against the bad luck — the inevitable bad luck — which dogs the gambler, the protraction of whose coming does not annihilate the power or the certitude of it — which indeed only renders the catastrophe the more effective. Within a month Vane had lost all his winnings — they had been pretty considerable, you must know — and, soon, most of his fortune.

Then, aged in a month, stricken but still supremely greedy of gain, he fled, with his daughter, to France; where, after a year meagrely lived at Boulogne, he gambled again; won — O strange event! and had the acumen — O thing still more strange! — to return with a couple of thousand pounds to Fovant-Chamberlayne.

And now had begun the lust of the miser in place of the gambler's fever; the time when first he had been seized by an intense passion for gold, a desire to save, to hoard instead of to spend; when the knowledge of another guinea added to his store meant, for him, a day of delight, the loss of one a paroxysm of rage. And so, with the two thousand pounds which he had snatched from the baize at Boulogne, and the remnants of his fortune as a foundation, he had begun slowly and

laboriously to build up his puny wealth, pinching, stinting, and storing. Alone at the Manor but for Julia — poor child — and one Jane Smith, a strange creature deaf and dumb — of gipsy stock — their only servant.

Life, such as this, lasted through four years, dull monotonous years, during which Julia lived an odd existence, speaking with no one but the inmates of the Manor, seldom going without its gates — a life of immense plainness, with no distractions, no respite. Of these years I have little to chronicle; their effect on the girl's character can be easily gauged. Nothing occurred, nothing changed but the seasons. For the most part she wandered alone through the park, sometimes with a book; the one predominant trait that those years developed in her was a passionate love of Nature.

Nature was the God she worshiped — she had little religion. Under placid skies of summer, or the chill, leaf-fluttering winds of autumn, among the frail colors of spring, or during the black watches of winter. To her each and all were perfection — all beautiful: she adored continually in Nature's temple — the Open World.

This love of the lovely earth and a small passion for books were the two restraining, refining influences of her life; for the rest she was wild — wild! A creature of impulse, of moods, of many yearnings undefined; of many thoughts difficult to express, not easy even for her own comprehension.

So life continued five years, until Daniel Bulstrode came upon this narrow stage. He was a country gentleman, not too wealthy, from over the downs in the valley of Chalke; a man florid, coarse, given up to drink, cards, hunting, and the usual vices of man. Their meeting was in this wise,

Julia had been wandering alone on the downs; it was a stormy afternoon of early April, the rain had beaten on her, the wind buffeted her; she was weary, pale with fatigue. Bulstrode had been riding carelessly along beside a coppice; suddenly his horse shied — a woman had appeared at a break in the trees. But such a woman! He quieted his horse and reined up. She was like some creature of the woods, with the glory of her hair — moist with rain, wild with wind — sheltering the oval of her face. For a moment they had looked at one another, she with a whimsical smile on her lips; then she had turned and fled, light as a fay, into the shadow of the trees.

Next, by cunning manœuvring, Bulstrode had found his way into the Manor and to the heart of the miser. 'Twas skilfully done — a love of wine, a willingness to play and to lose at cards had been the means. Within a month Mr. Vane, who had not spoken to five persons in as many years, was hand in glove with this Dan Bulstrode. But the latter was wise; it was two months before he told Vane that he wished to marry his daughter — yet this wisdom was futile, for Julia protested, refused; not if she died for it, would she marry him.

Rage, threats, violence, did not shake her, she was firm, assured; with all the force of her nature she hated the man. And now had come the strange adventures, the romance, the wild deeds of highwaymanry.

Lured on to play — for the time the old spirit of gambling had mastered him — Andrew Vane lost money; in a couple of weeks he was three hundred pounds in debt to Bulstrode. It was simple enough to pay; was there not the miser's hoard somewhere secreted in the Manor? But that he could not bring himself to do. That store of gold was holy; not to be defiled — the

money must be otherwise obtained. By sudden inspiration an idea had come to him, bizarre, unparalleled, perhaps, yet pertinent; Julia, his daughter, should be robber — *she* must obtain the money. He would give her the choice; she should marry Bulstrode — in which case the debt would be cancelled — or don breeches, straddle a horse, and become a gentleman of the road. What noble offers!

Can you wonder which she chose? A girl nurtured on twisted ideas, with only the pagan worship of Nature to guide her, motherless, alone, do you marvel at her choice? I think it would be the choice of many flung into such a position; the difference is, that she did it without a qualm of conscience.

At any rate, strange as it may seem, not long after the proposition Mistress Julia Vane rode forth masked, breaked, a gallant figure of young manhood, with intent to rob upon the highway. Within a month she had gained four hundred pounds in money and jewels, by capturing a coach or a post-chaise.

The thing caught hold of her nature; the adventure, the thrill of it, seized her; the danger and romance were entrancing; it echoed in her blood, throbbing in her veins. It was a delicious, soul-moving experience; a slice of life after those dreary years. Six times, perhaps, old Vane was greedy for more money, and demanded that Julia should seek it, and six times, with a spasm of excitement, Julia saddled her little mare and set out for the road. At the end of two months the country was in a ferment; while Julia laughed mischievously as Puck, and the miser gloated over his gains.

But now we must miss nine months or so of time and come to the present.

Afterward — at varying intervals — Julia had again

taken to the road; glorying in, fascinated by her deeds — not, you must understand, the crime of them, but the actual doing — the speed, the action, the gallop, the escapes, the bravery of it. And so, by degrees, the character of Wild Will evolved itself into a mysterious personage absolutely without fear; courteous; who robbed you as if he were playing a game rather than doing something of deadly earnest — and, for the nonce, risking his own head. But no one suspected that the scarcely-seen daughter of old Vane — the miser — was the same, limb for limb, as this racing fellow of the boot and saddle.

And so we come to the time when Julia had returned from her third pilgrimage to London, whither she had been sent to turn the jewels to gold; when she had been mocked at, disbelieved in by her father, dubbed liar, told to produce a further two hundred pounds, and failing that, to be given — like a slave — to Bulstrode.

I have been cursory with the summing of events, omitting details and giving merely the foreground features; I have told you of no special escapade, only telling they were there — showing a thread of pictures, no individual tableau. But with this you must be content; we must again turn forward.

CHAPTER XII

WILD WILL'S METHODS

JULIA, in the midst of her father's last outburst of anger, had slipped, as we know, from the room, weary of his rage and, in a measure, contemptuous of it; yet with the words of his threat echoing in her mind. He had never before spoken quite so openly, never said the supreme threat — never said that she should be made Bulstrode's wife by force. Up to now he had always shown some shadow of affection for his daughter, some *nuance* of love, in spite of his hardness and cruelty. Now that tenderness had vanished, he was adamant; from him she could no longer look for mercy.

So ran her thoughts as she crossed the hall and ascended the shallow stairs to her room. There the full meaning of this alternative came to her — the alternative of two hundred pounds. Even in her perplexity she smiled — it was so desperate. And yet, perhaps, it was not impossible to obtain. Oh, no, why should it be? By luck — the luck which till now had been her firm ally — would it not be easy to gain that sum on the road? Once before, in a night, had she reaped nearly as great a harvest. Once she had done it, but to do it again was not likely — Julia shrugged her shoulders French-wise. One could never tell what the world, the great wise world, has in store for one.

Then a thought, a clear illumining thought, struck her. She remembered the talk of the stranger at the

inn; had he not said that he carried with him a thousand pounds in gold and notes? Yes, and she had warned him of Wild Will, warned him against herself — she had laughed inwardly at that — and he had scoffed at her warning. The tone of disdain, of contempt, had aroused her, stirred her feelings; she had taken his disdain and contempt for mere bravado. It had piqued her at the time — it piqued her now.

She was seated by the window of her room, her listless eyes straying over the world outside — a wet world quivering to life after the storm, yet still drooping under its wrath. She recalled how, early that same morning, she had peered from her room at the "Hut" into the dark, when dawn was still sleeping at the foot of the horizon; and, from that picture summoned to her mind, her thoughts went back to the previous evening, to the supper, to the long sweet talk with the stranger. It had been an evening of delight, an hour of happiness; she had spoken to a man of honor, a man of worth — a gentleman.

Then as she followed these thoughts a smile broke on her lips — she was amused. He had laughed at Wild Will, mocked at danger; that thought repeated itself. What if she proved him wrong, what if she showed him the danger, presented the highwayman not in a story but in reality; as a man, not a wraith? There, too, lay her salvation; two hundred pounds would be easy to take; she would take that and nothing more; she would show him her power — the power of Wild Will. And the very meeting would be a pleasure, she would once again see the man who had given her a taste of humanity, something above the embruted creatures who were her companions. What contrast to Daniel Bulstrode!

She knew that if it were her intention to intercept the stranger — to waylay him on his road west — there was no time to lose; but for a little while she played with pros and cons, yet at heart knowing there was no alternative. The thought enchained her, she must again see the stranger of the inn. She would be unknown to him, but that was as it should be; for what would be his scorn and contempt did he know that she was nothing more than a criminal — a thief?

Again in her mind she returned to the morning when she had left the inn. She remembered how, as she journeyed away over the downs, she had turned her glance fixed on a certain window in that derelict house; her thoughts had leapt in strange and complex directions.

Julia had been hindered at Salisbury by one of the horses of her chaise casting a shoe; a long while, it had seemed to her, for her heart had been heavy; but at length they had again started westward — forward to embrace the storm. Now the storm had passed; the sun gushed out through a veil of cloud. It was time to be up and doing; time to cast forth sentiment. What had she to do with any of the softer things of life? She was hemmed in with a sordid environment; love, sympathy — the dear things akin to Nature — what had she to do with them?

“Come, come, faint heart; we must be moving — the road calls,” cried she. Then she rose and faced the sunlight; there were tears like rain-drops in her eyes.

Within ten minutes she was running lightly from the house — woman metamorphosed to man. She wore cream-colored buckskin breeches, green waistcoat and coat, high boots and, over all, a moss-green cloak made

with many capes. Her hair was done tight to her head and imprisoned by a wig; the peruke tied with a bow of black silk. Her costume — a smart one I assure you — was completed by a three-cornered hat, drab, broad-wristed gloves and a mask.

She went cautiously, even between the impenetrable thickness of shrubs; a dapper gentleman of the road — *point device*. It was always wise to go carefully, even though no one ever intruded beyond the high wall of the park — Julia did not wish to risk the gallows unduly!

She was accustomed now to these proceedings; the change from girl to man, the saddling of her little mare, the stealthy exit from the park through woods, out on to the road and up to the wide hills. Yet to-day there was a difference, only once before had she ventured forth with daylight at the full — usually it had been at dusk. But to-day she was reckless; not unconscious of danger but indifferent to it.

Treading the green-grown drive, she presently turned to the right, crossed a wild patch of lawn covered with straggling grass and circled with yews — long since grown out of shape and cognisance — and, passing through a gap beyond, came to halt before a shed, built roughly of stones with a thatched roof supported by heavy beams. In old days it had been a mere out-house, set between the garden and the park, now it was here that Julia's mare was stalled. In the ordinary stable it would have been unsafe, for Daniel Bulstrode on his frequent visits to the Manor rode a great roan horse which was always tethered there. By this you will learn that Bulstrode was entirely ignorant of Julia's escapades; he knew her only as a young enchantress, fierce, sullen sometimes, totally untamable — at any rate

to his will. Had you informed him that she was the Wild Will of local gossip, he would have laughed in your face, scorned your word, sworn by a string of oaths that it was a pedlar's pack of lies.

Here, then, lived Diana, a mare of the color of wet peat, tended solely by Julia; fed by her, groomed by her, loved by her; sharer of her adventures, fleet of foot, wise, even-tempered — a brute with a soul. As Julia thrust the key into the lock she was wondering how often old Vane had been here during her absence in London. Little as he could help she guessed; yet as many times as would be sufficient for the welfare of Diana, she knew — for things that were to his own advantage could easily be left to him. As the door opened and the dim light brightened, the mare moved in her stall; then, knowing who came, she whinnied softly. Julia stole up to her, felt the arch of her neck, put her cheek against the mushroom-softness of her nose, stroked the pricked ears.

For a minute they stood together, caressing; then Julia turned to other things. She fed her carefully, gave her water from a pail, and began the saddling. All the while Diana stood still, yet quivering slightly — the breath and speed of freedom were awakening in her veins.

Julia was practised. It was not long before the little mare was saddled, a couple of pistols stuck in the holsters, the reins lying at the foot of the curving neck, ready to be taken. Then, having ascertained that no one was in sight, she led Diana from the warm atmosphere of the stable out into the air; caution was imperative here — it was possible that someone had scaled the park walls, eager to pry into the secrets of the Manor.

The thunder had passed far away now, but the sky was still dappled with heavy clouds and only in streaks and flashes did the sun break through them. But the country was bright after the rain, everything was glistening even in the shadows; everywhere the birds were choiring as they sought diligently for worms.

Having skirted the open ground that sloped to the lake, Julia mounted and horse and rider together plunged into the dripping arcade of a wood; beneath the mare's feet the sodden ground was hushed; silent as phantoms they went — almost sinister in the twilight of the sunless trees.

Julia's brain was afire, she was panting for the fray; her heart beating fast to adventure. How she loved the liberty and romance of it! There was uncertainty, too; she was building on the thought that the stranger would perforce have been delayed in Salisbury — no one, were he not a fool or a king's messenger, would travel in that mad whirl of elements. That being so, and if — there was a cloud of uncertainties you will perceive — he rode again onward that very afternoon, she should encounter him on the hills. There, at any rate, she would wait in ambush — maybe she would prove to him the reality of Wild Will.

Her thoughts came to a standstill as Diana pulled up, instinct driven, at the end of the wandering track — they had come to the encircling wall of the park. Before them rose a broad gate, a firm affair composed of two plain panels of wood set in the stone wall, a good eight feet in height. Here Julia dismounted and, producing a key, inserted it in the rusty lock. As the panel swung open, Julia peered out into the narrow road that here bordered the park — with a heart leap of joy she saw that it was tenantless. Quickly she led Diana

through the gate and, closing it behind her, mounted again. Of set purpose she did not lock it; one never knew if, on return, haste might not be imperative (a life and death affair) and a gate with a lock easy to be fastened, when once passed, was more convenient than one to be unlocked in full view of two hundred yards of road. A highwayman must be careful, you perceive, with the dangers to be avoided as well as the dangers to escape from.

The gate negotiated, the pair (horse and girl) crossed the road, followed a path for a quarter of a mile then, leaving the shelter of the trees, turned into a chalk track which led sideways — in a deep furrow — up to the hills. Here she put Diana to a trot, for, though screened by the high bramble-muffled bank, the road was not a place in which to linger — it was too patent.

Behind her lay the valley for the most part gloomy with shadows, only here and there lit by revealing snatches of sunshine; in these golden circles one saw distinctly knobs of woodland, the emerald of a meadow — in one spot the shining skin of a serpent river. There lay Fovant-Chamberlayne half smothered in trees, set between the hills of its particular valley; one could distinguish the box-like tower of the church and, within a cleft of land, a corner of the Manor looking up with black window-eyes at the line of hills.

So Julia reached the main road — the long road that curves on the back of the hills fifteen miles or so from Salisbury. In summer it is a way fit for angels aspiring, in winter bleak and interminably dreary. Yet by it went all travelers west, and on it Julia — a neat figure of a man, forbiddingly masked and armed — continued for perhaps half a mile, then turned into a

coppice of hawthorn and wych-elms that here borders it — one of the few knots of shade on the long white ribbon. There, in ambush, she would wait.

The hour was nearing six o'clock, and the sun had begun his fiery decline and sent level beams across the world; it was near the time, thought Julia, when the stranger — her prey — should come. But the expanse of road towards Salisbury was void; only once a horseman came from the opposite direction — a farmer jogging clumsily on a gray nag, round as an ox. There was a bubbling excitement in Julia's mind with, too, a leavening of dread; never had she experienced such fear, such incertitude, since her first wild adventure. She had imagined herself hardened to the danger, the impudence, the risk of it, and now her heart throbbed as if she were a tyro at the brave game: even though her prey, instead of a coach or a post-chaise, was but a single gentleman — his servant she counted not at all, for they always took to their heels — yet she was afraid — palpitatingly afraid for the moment!

She endeavored to analyse her sensations, endeavored to realise more fully why she was doing this, so that she might drive home the thought of the alternative. Yet why should she hesitate, where lay the difference between this and all the other acts of highwaymanry? The answer came swiftly; this was against a friend, a sympathiser, a man who had held her worthy, who would treat her as honorable. There stood the difference.

Julia had waited half an hour — maybe more — within the shelter of the trees, when she perceived, far along the road, a single horseman riding quickly. Her pulses throbbed — could this be he? . . . Then

came the remembrance that her quarry traveled with a servant! At the respite she laughed gaily, not knowing why.

The horseman was nearing now, but she watched his approach casually, thinking that she would not risk a chance sortie. She would wait for the great prize.

Then, suddenly, a cry sprang to her lips as the horseman came on at a sharp trot. It was undoubted; he was the stranger of the inn and — alone! The fortune of it! Yet, as he approached Julia seemed paralysed; she sat motionless on her horse. He was almost abreast of her, she could see him plainly, discern his features, see the turn of his eyes, and she was letting him pass, unhindered — she —

[With a movement — instinctive, impulsive — she dug her heels into Diana's flanks, her hand seized the round stock of a pistol. In an instant, scarcely realising, she was midway on the road; the pistol held before her cocked and primed.

"Stand!" cried she. Her voice was even, the tone disguised as always on these strange occasions.

Michael's horse reared tumultuously on his haunches, terror showing in its eyes, then, under the influence of the rein, it quieted. They faced each other.

"Stand," she repeated, "and deliver!"

"Sir, you are conventional," said Michael — he was actually smiling.

"In simple things conventions are good," said she.

Michael raised his brows.

"You call highway robbery simple, eh?"

"To the robber — I cannot speak for the victim." Julia spoke curtly; with all the power on her side, with a loaded pistol pointed full at the stranger's breast — and, mind you, the barrel did not waver; it was rock-

firm — she yet felt a little disconcerted. Then she realised that the man was bandying with her in order to gain time. That pricked her to act.

“Sir, I have few minutes to spare; your money immediately, or you will find a few ounces of lead a trifle too near your heart.”

There was braggartry — with a dash of melodrama!

“And if I refuse, you will not relent, you will carry out your threat?”

“Wild Will never relents.”

With a scarcely perceptible movement Michael drew back; his lips went taut.

“Sir, I feel myself honored to be robbed by such a celebrity.” He seemed a trifle less at his ease — any man indeed would in such a situation. Next he fumbled in a pocket and brought out a guinea and a few coins in silver.

Fire gleamed in Julia's eyes — surprise, resentment. Wild Will was unused to this.

“Sir, I suspect, by your appearance, that you carry more than that. Give me instantly what you have or, I swear it, I will shoot.”

Tumultuous thoughts were in Julia's mind, but a sense of resentment overcame all else. She, in her character of “gentleman of the road” — the terror of the country, the bogey of law and order — was being treated lightly by the stranger — without seriousness. She felt primed to anything; she would as soon snap the trigger of the pistol as snap her fingers.

“You have more money,” she cried. “I see the outline of a packet in the breast of your coat.”

She spoke more or less at hazard, she knew only that the night before in the inn parlor he had put his hand to his breast and she had heard the whisper of crisp

notes. But the stroke told; for the first time Michael's cheek paled, his eyes stared a little. No man, be he a paragon of valor, loves to lose a thousand pounds.

"I confess it," said he, and reluctantly his hand fumbled into the lining of his coat, where lay the money. A gleam of pleasure, a tingling of victory overcame Julia.

"Out with it," she commanded.

Meekly Michael drew forth a packet.

"There," said he, and his eyes smiled; he saw the humor of it. "A thousand pounds!"

Julia peered forward and feigned surprise.

"Sir, you have had luck in London; more luck than we poor fellows of the road often look for."

Michael shrugged his shoulders.

"To-day at least you will have no cause to complain. Here, take the stuff." He held it forward.

Julia pursed up her lips under the fringe of her mask. Now would come her real victory; to vanquish and then to cede advantage—there lies the root of the conqueror's pleasure. Now could the woman show her pre-eminence.

"No, sir, I will refrain. So seldom do gentlemen return from London so well equipped that, stap me (this oath was a masculine touch), I will not despoil you. Instead of taking all, I shall be satisfied with two hundred guineas. Wild Will, you understand, is no common thief. He is a gentleman, fearful, powerful, but not avaricious; one who has taken to his present life not merely for the sake of gold but for the freedom—the life itself. And now, sir, the money."

Without further word, struck silent with amazement, Michael counted out the money and handed it to her, with a bow; Julia received it carelessly.

"And now," said Sir Michael, "may we not finish this agreeable conversation?"

"Certainly, to me it has been wearisome long since; when the end is assured the means of attaining it are always without interest."

And, with a movement of the reins, Julia backed Diana, leaving the road west open to the stranger; but the pistol — though her arm ached painfully — remained fixed.

"Good-day, and thank you."

"Good-day," said Michael, and, touching his horse with his heels, was away.

For a minute Julia followed the receding figure with her eyes; then, dropping her arm, she turned Diana aside. She was in haste; it was dangerous to linger here in the light of a summer evening, with the sun's gold falling over the downs. But her haste was unwise, for she had but gone a matter of twenty yards when there came the crack of a shot and a bullet sang past a few inches to the rear of the little mare's flank; it had been aimed, it seemed, to strike the belly.

With fire in her heart Julia swung round; the stranger was two hundred yards or so away, his horse breaking into a gallop. With a word in her ear Diana sprang forward in pursuit, her hoofs thundering on the road.

So the stranger — the coward — had attempted to shoot down the little mare — to give her a lesson — to humble her. Unreasoningly, femininely, she imagined that he had wished to humble her because she was a woman. A sudden anger seized her — righteous anger in her own mind.

She was gaining now, gaining on the fleeing figure; only a short space of rushing road lay between the pair

of racing figures — Diana was swift. Then, across the haze of her mind flashed a thought; the loaded pistol was still in her hand — with it she would answer him. He had tried to shoot her horse — she would shoot his.

With an impulsive tug she pulled up Diana, quivering, on her haunches, then, resting the barrel of the pistol across her wrist, she took quick aim, and fired.

A moment, and a shiver of horror flashed through her — the stranger had flung up his arms and was tottering in the saddle.

CHAPTER XIII

THE AWAKENING

AFTER a pageant of whirling thoughts, of strange sensations, pains, dreams — of interminable abyss, of insurmountable heights, of white-hot iron, hell-black darkness and intense light — after, in fact, a night of delirium and fever, pretty acute, Sir Michael opened his eyes and came to his senses as the church clock of Fovant-Chamberlayne struck nine.

For a while he lay still, content, to a certain degree, to leave his mind blank, to rest with closed eyes; to feel beneath him the billowy comfort of a feather bed before endeavoring to capture his errant mind, to clutch at memory, to visualise and intensify.

Yet, to begin with, his mind seemed empty as a sheet of paper, totally incapable of informing him, even vaguely, as to the events which had given him such a pandemonium of a night and such a biting pain in his right shoulder — it was like a knife twisting in the flesh. But in vain he clutched at stray and wandering suggestions; his brain buzzed and whirled like a top. He would give up the effort; he wished to Heaven that he could sleep — why couldn't he be left alone? Why had he been flogged so piteously throughout the night? Then he remembered something of a doctor, something of Pierre, a revolving moon, and — Sir Michael slipped back again into slumber.

At the end of two hours of pure, unruffled, satisfying sleep he again awoke. This time his senses were keener, the power to open his eyes and look about him less indefinite; his reason was less clouded, but the pain in his shoulder was still gnawing and fiery.

He lay in a simple white-washed room, furnished almost meagrely, but neat as a pin. To the left of his bed — really, it was a remarkably comfortable bed! — was a door, very narrow; to his right an old wardrobe of oak; while beyond the end of the bed he could see a window, hung across with rose-tinted curtains that swung inward on the breath of a breeze. Once or twice it bore the scent of flowers along with the ripple of a blackbird.

When all these things, and a few besides, were comprehended, and he was still resting passive in the soft embraces of the feathery mattress, there came back, in a flash, remembrances of the evening of the ride, though he did not know if it were distant one or a dozen days, was uncertain if the endless hours through which he had passed made up a night or a week of nights and days. He remembered now the storm in Salisbury; how he had been delayed, his intention of staying at Shaftesbury; above all, he remembered the lady at the inn. Ah! he had seen her, too, in his delirium — mocking him with lips pouting to be kissed, bending low and fading like a mist.

Then full remembrance rushed on him: he recalled how Pierre had remained an hour or two in Salisbury so that he might direct the baggage on to Shaftesbury — the baggage which was coming from London; and next how he, Michael Stanton, had ridden alone along the sweeping spaces of the downs and then — of course, how had it slipped? — the bizarre meeting with Wild Will; the robbery; how he had proffered a thousand

pounds and had been lightened of but two hundred guineas — he smiled as he thought of that. He found the episode whimsical. And the termination? Why, he had ridden a matter of a hundred yards, when he had turned, beheld the rascally highwayman making off, and had been seized with the desire — irresistibly, for the sport of it — to wing that little mare and bring her master to the ground. He had shot, missed and had then been chased — yes, chased — a quarter of a mile or so along the road; then — it was clear as sunshine now — the echo of a shot had sounded in his ears, and then had followed the burning pain in his shoulder, the abominable sensation of instability, the tottering, the dull contact with the earth and a rush of warm blood to his mouth. He felt with his left hand; his shoulder was bandaged firmly. Certainly it was deucedly unpleasant.

He had traveled so far with his recollections — and indeed he could go no further — when Pierre entered. His master noticed, from between half-closed lashes, that an anxious look set on his face as he tiptoed to the bed and cautiously leaned over. He had stood there perhaps thirty seconds when Sir Michael leisurely allowed his eyes to fully open.

“*Dieu merci!*” murmured Pierre, and drew respectfully back.

Michael smiled.

“No, Pierre, not dead this time,” said he.

“No, sir, not dead yet, sir.” In his joy he was foolish.

Michael laughed as much as he was able — it hurt abominably.

“No, you’ve got me still, and likely to. Give me something to drink and tell me why I’m here and where ‘here’ is.”

With a bow Pierre moved to a little table where stood a bottle, a jug of water, a glass and a few other oddments — more or less medicinal. On his re-approach Sir Michael painfully raised his head and drank from the glass that Pierre held to his lips. But the effort was great, he lay back panting with the stress of it. For a little he was forced to rest passive, eyelids drawn, chafing at the knowledge of his weakness.

“Pierre,” said he presently; he heard with chagrin that his voice was shaky.

“Yes, sir?” The man was all attention.

“I wish to know how I came here: you found me, perhaps, tumbled over like a shot rabbit in a ditch.”

“Certainly, sir, you were in a ditch — I know nothing of the rabbit.”

“No, no, I didn’t —”

He stopped abruptly as the pain plucked more impatiently at his shoulder.

“Well,” he continued, “you rode after me, having ordered the baggage to be sent to Shaftesbury, eh? and found me — never mind about the rabbit — in a ditch. At what time?”

“Seven o’clock, sir. You were lying *pêle-mêle*, soft with blood, and your face like — like cheese.”

“Hum — a pleasing spectacle. What did you do?”

“Your horse had gone, monsieur, so I got off mine and put you on it. Then, seeing houses, I found a road and we came down.”

“I don’t shine in this recital,” said Michael; “but it was deucedly well done of you. So I was brought down like a sack of wheat, you, I suppose, clutching at my middle. *Et puis?*”

“I came to this inn — it is good for a small village.”

"Yes, it seems fair enough. Have I seen a doctor? I seem to remember talk of a lancet and bleeding."

"Dr. Bainby was sent from Shaftesbury. He bled you as you have said, gave you a draught and bound up your wound."

Michael turned his head impatiently; no doctor had attended him for fifteen years.

"Oh, hang it," he grumbled, "what is the matter with me? Have I a pound of lead in my body?"

"No, monsieur, the doctor said that the bullet had *traversé* your shoulder, wounding the bone of the neck the —"

"The collar-bone, eh?"

"*Oui*, monsieur, the collar-bone. You were also weak from — the blood-loss."

"So he bled me more!"

"Not much, monsieur. Also, he said that you must be quiet, and that it was lucky so good a doctor was near. He comes again this morning."

"And the time at present?"

"Eleven o'clock, monsieur."

Michael yawned. "Then you can leave me till the doctor comes."

"You want nothing, monsieur?"

"No, Pierre, thank you."

"But the doctor, monsieur —"

"Without doubt the doctor told you to do a score of things. Be calm. I will inform him that you would have been an excellent nurse and are an excellent fellow."

"*Merci*, monsieur," said Pierre, beaming, and left the room.

With solitude again Michael's thoughts scurried hither and thither, surveying details which he had for-

gotten or scarcely had been aware of previously. He recalled suddenly a patch stuck on Clothilde Chamby's right cheek; recalled the faces of the other players when he had thrown double sixes at Jack Kitson's; recollected a patch of flaming gorse set beneath pines, by which he had trotted on his way to London. And then he remembered, minutely, the Unknown Lady as he had seen her in the inn; felt again the velvet softness of her hand, recalled the curve and tint of her fingers.

But his reverie was broken, footsteps sounded on the stairs; voices muffled with care — one belonged to Pierre, the other was thin and reedy — whispered without. Then softly the door opened, and the doctor — Matthew Bainby, M.D., entered. At first sight he was like a crow, bleached white about the head with many suns.

The little man came in, tiptoed to the bedside on minute feet stuck at the end of legs like spindles, and bowed. His face was pale, crossed and creased, with ink-black eyes peering behind spectacles. He was not really old but absurdly antique-looking; in his heart he imagined that age gave one the impression of being skilful and scientific.

"Well, sir; well, sir," he began in his meagre treble, "I trust that you find yourself more yourself, eh? But I already am cognisant of that; I deduce from your features that you have much improved since last night. There will be, I think, no immediate cause for anxiety, but care must be exercised, *extreme* care. Happy it is that *I* was summoned to attend you, happy that this small village is within an appreciable distance from Shaftesbury — I mean at no distance that renders it impossible for me to answer a cry from sufferers who may happen to lie here. It was certainly wise that the worthy host of this hostelry — for, alack, it is no more!

— should have remembered Dr. Matthew Bainby; for had you been under the care of Mr. Main of Sarum I shudder — yes, shudder — for the consequences; but now — now, sir, that I have the honor, the —”

Michael, with a sigh, held up his hand.

“ Yes, Dr. Bainby, I am delighted to find myself under your care; but having escaped from Mr. Main in person I am willing to escape him in conversation. Tell me how you find me? ”

With a deprecatory expression and a spreading forth of small hands, the doctor approached the bed. Then, to the accompaniment of baseless prattle — self-emulative, hollow, sparsely erudite — the physician examined Michael with scrupulous minuteness; probed the wound, felt his pulse, scrutinised his tongue, examined his eyeball, tapped his chest and, at length, drew back with a satisfied nod.

“ Sir, permit me to congratulate you,” piped he, “ you have withstood the shock with remarkable fortitude — with stamina; that’s it — with stamina — and that is what is required; though even stamina is useless without the judicious application of medical knowledge. And, sir, let me tell you that you have been lucky — extremely lucky. One is not often overcome — without offence, sir — by such a daring rascal as Wild Will, and escape so lightly, so —”

But Michael was weary — this babble maddened him. He put in a remark.

“ Excuse me, sir, but I should be obliged if you would give all instructions to my servant — I trust him entirely. To-morrow, perhaps, I may have the pleasure of again meeting you, meanwhile I suppose that rest is necessary? ”

For a moment Dr. Bainby had flushed — yes, even

his parchment cheeks had reddened with anger — but at mention of another meeting his ire subsided. The gentleman was an eccentric, but against that had to be set the fact that he was a baronet, and attendance on a baronet was not an every-week affair for the doctor. So he smiled effusively and, bowing, moved to the door.

“Rest, sir, complete rest,” he twittered. “And as you desire me to give instructions, directions and warnings to your servant I will do so. Good-day, sir, good-day.”

The door closed behind the doctor and Pierre, and as Michael lay back on the pillows and closed his eyes, he heard them descending the stair. A deeper air blew through the window bearing the scent of flowers — quite exquisite; a cow lowed in the meadows, birds chattered at the eaves, the sunshine covered all; once Michael heard the drone of a wandering bee. Here was peace, indeed, but haunted peace; his mind was haunted by, his thoughts inextricably woven with, the vision of a woman's face — sad-eyed and very sweet.

CHAPTER XIV

AN ORCHARD SCENE

SIR MICHAEL, of a constitution virile and tough, progressed apace, and all Dr. Bainby's insistence could not keep him within the house more than a couple of weeks. At the end of that period he considered himself sufficiently recovered to descend to the inn garden, and there to idle under the apple trees, silent and musing, or with the companionship of some book lent him by the garrulous physician. For him the time had passed with varying monotony; at whiles — though rarely — he had been completely content, grateful to rest after the turmoil and gaiety of London — somewhat exaggerated in his mind, I fancy — flattering himself that he was a gentleman of leisure and not of fashion, and amusing his endless hours of do-nothingness with dabbings in poetry — yes, I confess it, during those days he scribbled poems. Amorous, lover-like things containing sobs, yearnings, protests, put in phrases passably pretty — set in the sonnet form.

It is, perhaps, redundant to add that the subject and object of these poems — the target for his metrical arrows — was none other than the Unknown; and she also was the cause of various hours of irritation, despair, impatience, when he strove to turn from poet to painter and outline her features — to mark the wonder of her eyes. But though more skilled in this art than the other, the efforts, to his mind, were abortive, the result

meagre; and irritably he tore the sketches in shreds, crushed them between his fevered hands. How could he hope to portray those divine features? even echo the magic of those eyes or the glory of the whole image? No, perhaps it was in his power to draw a beautiful woman, but to draw a woman who was also a goddess he found sheer impossibility. He might have done justice to Clothilde Chamby, but with Her it was useless. It would want the genius-guided brush of a Titian, a Velasquez or a Sir Joshua for that.

Yet though his verses seemed colorless compared to his ardor, and his sketches formless compared with his model, there was one thing that buoyed up his mind; he had discovered that She — the unique She — lived no other where than at Fovant-Chamberlayne. He had, indeed, learned much from Dr. Bainby: these are the principal facts.

At the old Manor, set at the end of the village, lived a certain Mr. Vane along with his daughter and a deaf and dumb servant — the former a glorious creature beautiful as daylight, and none other than the Unknown. There was mystery around the house; to the minds of the villagers it was more or less a haunted place; and, in their imaginations, its inhabitants were bogies, almost as greatly to be feared as Wild Will himself. It seemed that ever since old Vane had returned to Fovant-Chamberlayne — a matter of some years now — he had been a negligible entity, unseen, mewed up within the austere walls of the Manor, and those who had begun by laughing had come to fearing; for, somehow, the fact escaped that he was a miser. Next some tales were whispered of his life and habits in London — none, I assure you, to his credit — and this had made things worse; while his solitude, his aloofness, accounted for the fact that

odd stories were credited by the villagers. Stories, such as that he played cards nightly with the devil, that he was a magician, and had bewitched Farmer Briant's cows whose meadows adjoined the park — and many others. Of friends he had but one and he was of recent fellowship; this was a certain Daniel Bulstrode, a rake-helly gentleman — in a bucolic way — from the valley of Chalke. It seemed that the inmates of the Manor lived upon provisions sent weekly from Salisbury, which were always left just within the great gates, and fetched thence by Jane, the mute; occasionally cases of something came by goods-wagon, while once or twice it was known that old Vane had hired a chaise from Shaftesbury, and in it his daughter had gone bowling up to town — she had done so recently.

So much Sir Michael learned during his first conversation with the doctor; at subsequent meetings he had forced him to tell all he knew of the miser's daughter. She also, it seemed — her name was Julia — came rarely without the walls of the park, though sometimes she traversed the village on her way to the downs, speaking, nevertheless, to no one; passing like a glorious spirit, unapproachable. The doctor could tell little else because little else was to be known, for now the dwellers in the Manor were left to their hibernating existence, undisturbed; yet feared, and talked of, while all manner of strange tales were spun around them — as a grub is spun round with silk.

Three weeks precisely after his encounter with Wild Wild — I am faithful to the name — Sir Michael was sitting in the small garden, half orchard, that lay on one side of the "Fovant Arms." He was beneath an apple tree in the sun-speckled shade of the branches; around him the air was sweet with the breath of the

flowers which grew in a great living mass of color at one end of the orchard — pinks, June lilies, and roses. Before him, at the other side of a low hedge, ran the village street bordered on either side by deep-browed cottages, lay gardens and sprinkled trees. It was ineffably peaceful, beautiful with a rural tenderness; and to the peace and beauty his thoughts were well atuned — the thoughts of a lover set to the music of June. He was heart-glad at the strange chance of it all, he was even reconciled to the meeting with Wild Will, for it was that which had made easy his quest for the Unknown; that which had chained him within half a mile of her. Surely the gods had willed it!

Yet, though praising the luck, Sir Michael was chafing at the delay; he was all afire to start the siege, to break down the mystery of the Manor, to tear aside the veil, to rush to the wooing. He was impatient. Here, with young summer ardent as a lover around him, his pulses beat quickly — he was pining for the fight. The spark had been blown to leaping flame.

Now he was leaning back in the chair, his book fallen to the ground — a dingy object on the cool emerald grass-blades — his eyes closed, breathing in the nectar of the air. He had been there long (his thoughts, as I have told you, fully in harmony with the immediate world) when, presently, his ears caught the soft beat of footsteps. Then, as the sounds grew nearer, something — an impulse, an instinct — seized on Michael; slowly — very slowly — he opened his eyes so that he might glance between lids well-nigh closed. It was Julia; she had paused, was looking over the barrier of the hedge straight to him. There she stayed for a twinkling of time — the length of a thrush's full note — and turned.

With wide eyes now Michael watched as she moved away; then, rising to his feet, he moved to the hedge and gazed at the retreating figure, noting with rapture the poise of the head, the gleam of hair, the lightness of her step. In a minute she had gone, but that minute was of more value than the medicines, the bleedings and all the wiles of Dr. Bainby.

CHAPTER XV

SIR MICHAEL INTRUDES

ABOUT four of the clock on the following afternoon Sir Michael, after a satisfactory though tedious interview with Dr. Bainby, informed Pierre that he was about to take a walk — his initial walk since the accident — and accordingly set out. There was, I may tell you, a set purpose in his mind, a rigid determination to visit the Manor, or, failing that, the park. Of the direction in which it lay he was fully aware, but that was the direction of the main entrance, and it was certainly not his idea to risk the final rebuff of having the front door slammed in his love-sick face. But in spite of all things he was determined. All through the night hours — and those, too, of the day — he had been eager with thought, fired by the momentary glimpse of yesterday; his mind wild with conjectures concerning the old Manor; keen with wonderings anent Mistress Julia.

He discovered, as he walked down the street, that his limbs were still weak from illness — even with a cane he went slowly; his face, too, was pale, very, and his eyes looked large and lustreless, though in their depths lurked still the fire of youth — easy to be seen. Beyond the cottage and the gray church, set in its posy of yew-trees, he came to a path that wound away enticingly from the leftward running road. It attracted him, this rustic way, all grass carpeted, which dived so coolly between hedges of hawthorn, beneath the heavy shadows of elms

and chestnuts; bastioned with thyme-swathed brambles. It was more romantic than the road, for the road was a road for the world; this surely, a way fit for poets — bound to lead him aright: lead him to some spot whence he could survey the grim roofs of the Manor — perhaps behold her from afar. That would be soul-satisfying.

To-day he must merely reconnoitre; see and comprehend the stage on which his love-drama was to be acted — see and plan. For there must be cunning in the wooing rather than audacity. With these thoughts Sir Michael turned into the shaded path.

It led him down the slope of a hill, whence on either side he could see between the trees, pastures and, before him, a mass of mounting woodland. He had come, as a matter of fact, between those small hills set in the valley of which I have told you — was, indeed, straight within that valley's grasp, with the village to the right and the Manor close leftward.

Presently, when he had meandered during many minutes, a gap appeared in the hedge, opening into a strip of field bordered at its further end by a stone wall — moss-grown with a decent age, and half-veiled by elders, hazels and slim elms.

Michael paused; surely that wall must encircle the park, surely those stones must guard Julia — he would investigate. He crossed the field gaily; above carolled a lark, pendent in the endless blue, the scent of the elder-flowers wafted towards him. With the rapture of the day Sir Michael forgot the hurt of his wound; he stepped forward briskly to the trees. Arrived at the wall he paused again; before him lay a heavy tangle of youthful trees and sturdy bushes. His thoughts were busy with imaginings; beyond that wall lay her demesne; there was the hallowed spot which knew her daily pres-

ence, there were the things of Nature which had watched the growth of her sweet body, had heard the song of her lips — how Sir Michael envied those things which flourished in such proximity to her tender loveliness! And with such lover's enmity came the desire to share the fortune of these dumb attendants, to see the theatre of her doings, behold the intimate surroundings of her actions. But how to do it? There lay the difficulty.

Ordinarily he would have considered ten foot or so of wall no obstacle — if a man could not clamber over such a heap of stones he was of little value — but now, with a scarce healed bullet hole in his shoulder, it was a different matter; yet it was possible that he might find so convenient a sequence of footholds that the climbing of the wall would present little more difficulty than mounting a dozen stairs. So, with this thought in his mind, Sir Michael parted the rough leaves of a hazel and pushed through between the greenery. Within the growth was less dense, for the bushes were bare and scraggy around the roots — all their leaf-bearing branches plunging upward to the light and air — so that Sir Michael walked comparatively easily through the shuffling leaves, forced only rarely to pull aside some branch or bramble. Suddenly he paused with an exclamation of satisfaction.

An elm, vigorous and youthful, had grown close to the foundation of the wall and, with the strength of each spring and the growing girth of its trunk, pushed steadily at the stones, and thus, with time, had riven in it a breach. Now it stood imperious, midway between crumbling lips of stone.

No wonder that Sir Michael was satisfied; how could Fortune smile more benignly? For here she had made, hidden from the prying exterior world, a doorway lead-

ing easily to the Manor and to it she had conducted him who most needed its aid. With a whimsical smile he doffed his hat to the elm; and, in imagination, he seemed to receive an answer to his obeisance in the rustling of leaves. Then, as the breeze faded, he squeezed himself — I own that the effort gave him a sharp sense of pain — between the tree-trunk and the bricks and plaster.

Beyond he found himself again in a Nature-built apartment, with branches and slender twigs for roof, leaves for walls and spongy moss as carpet; light filtered through grudgingly. To his ears came, along with the tap-tap of a wood-pecker, the rustling of rabbits. Sir Michael had paused to breathe in the quiet harmony, the woodland peace, the *mêlée* of green and brown and gold, but in a moment another thing held him spellbound — the sound of a woman's voice, singing. The sound flowed forth suddenly, naturally, as if it could not be repressed, like the blossoming of a flower, the rise and flow of crystal springs, the flash of dawn. It came, indeed, like the clear involuntary chant of a thrush or a blackcap — it was wordless, too, or rather word-perfect — as you will. It came in trills, little sobs and flutters, and then interludes of elfin melody; and to Michael, always in a poetic mood these days, it was as if some dryad called him from the heart of an oak. For a time he listened motionless, trammelled in the witchery of it, then softly he moved forward through the leaves. Before him was a clearing in the girdle of trees; he came to it, and parted the branches; the sunlight danced into the shadow. As he stood listening the singer approached unwittingly. It was Julia.

In the dingy London shop Michael had thought her lovely, at the inn he had discovered new loveliness, but

here was something far beyond — a goddess, a dream-woman. She came slowly, a figure tall and slim, clad in a simple frock of brown, that hung straight from her throat; her feet and ankles were bare, in her arms was a sheaf of dog-roses.

And now she was close — Michael must break the spell.

“Mistress Julia,” said he softly, “who taught you that song?”

In a second the voice stopped; she raised her eyes; there was amaze, surprise, fear in them, but she did not cry. She was brave, you see.

“Sir, why are you here?” There was a tremor behind the words.

“I came — to find you.”

She laughed faintly.

“I wonder that you remember —”

“You wonder that I should remember! How should I forget?”

Michael’s heart was throbbing—love had him fast. He continued quickly:

“You are surprised to see me again; but did you think that, by fleeing before me in the dawn, you could escape from me forever?” There was silence. “Tell me, what did you think — if you thought at all?”

“I thought it inevitable—how should we meet again?”

“It was the meeting that was inevitable; I grieve that it was so long delayed. You — you are not sorry?”

She broke in quickly, but her eyes were downcast.

“No; I am not sorry, but it is strange — like this.”

“I have seen you since that night, that night at the inn, I —”

A little gasp escaped from her lips; it arrested him.

"What is it?" he asked quickly.

"Nothing; I am tired — look, I have gathered all these."

She held out the flowers, quickly, naturally; but there was a look of disquiet on her features.

"They are beautiful," replied he, unthinking; he was wondering at that little gasp of surprise.

"Yes, they are beautiful," said she; then, with child-like simplicity of action, she knelt down on the turf. Michael stood beside her.

For a while there was silence. When she spoke she looked him unflinching in the eyes.

"Please, where did you see me?"

Michael smiled. "That is secret; a mortal must not confess when he catches glimpses of a goddess."

"It is — unkind. Tell me, quick."

"You cannot compel."

"No, but I can threaten. Tell me or I — I go."

"I shall pursue."

"That would be unavailing. You forget, sir, that you are wounded."

"You know that?"

"Of course."

"Why 'of course'?"

She flushed.

"The news is everywhere."

Michael mused; watching each movement of the fay-figure before him, noting the shade of her cheek, the look of the eye, he could not let her go, could not relinquish her.

"I saw you yesterday — you passed the 'Fovant Arms.'"

Julia breathed a sigh; she could afford even to smile now.

"You were not asleep?"

"No, I was not asleep. You will stay now?"

"A little perhaps. Come, you are tired I know; sit."

The command was of childish imperiousness — another proof of the blending of her character, the interweaving of youth and age. Michael found her elfish, inexplicable — enchanting.

He obeyed her command, but the action caused him some pain; he bore it with a tightening of the lips. Somehow he guessed that though she might wince at some things, at pain she would smile. He was right there.

"And you warned me of this fellow Wild Will! — the accident was my own fault. I ran after the bogey and found it reality."

"You were unfortunate. I am sorry."

"It was an amusing experience — afterward. Mistress Vane, believe me I am not altogether sorry. It was convenient, too, in that it made me halt at Fovant in place of Shaftesbury — 'twas, indeed, amazing luck. There was no need of search; I have found you straightway."

"You were looking for me? I cannot understand."

Michael glanced at her quickly. There was no coquetry, no feint; she was simply puzzled.

"You may not understand, but it was you that shook my plans. At Salisbury I decided to travel to Shaftesbury, to stay there and search for you thence; I could not, you see, let you vanish into the mists of the unknown from whence you had emerged, I could not leave untended the seeds which you had sown in my heart. I was on my way to Shaftesbury when Wild Will —"

She made a movement with her hands.

"Please, no more of him —"

"You have changed."

"A woman often changes, I believe."

"Believe?"

"Yes, I know few women. I have knowledge of them only from books and from — myself. I know nothing of the world — how should I know of women?"

Michael's heart throbbed; he leaned forward toward her. The cup of his passion was brimming — he could be silent no longer.

"To a man one woman can be all the world — all knowledge," he cried.

For a moment they looked each other full in the eyes. She saw the love in his — he the realising of that love in hers — the awakening surprise. There was silence — for a flash of time the world fell away.

Then the spell was snapped — Julia sprang to her feet. Michael heard her speaking.

"What are you saying, what am I listening to? It is folly."

"Sweet folly." He was beside her now.

"Sweet and bitter — yes, bitter," cried she. "You must forget; go now and do not return. Why have you followed me? You do not know, you do not know."

"I know nothing but that I love you; I want no further knowledge but that you love me —"

"I cannot — I cannot. We have talked folly, we must forget." She paused, a tremor shook her, then she continued: "How did you come here?"

"By the wall. Your voice guided me — then I saw you. You were like Perdita when Florizel first found her."

She glanced up, smiling, for a moment fear had gone.

"No one has ever seen me like this—I am ashamed."

"So would a rose be ashamed at her beauty."

"Sir, enough." There was a firmness in her voice. "We must say 'Farewell'; it is late. You had no right to come here; believe me it is better not. Far wiser not to strive against the inevitable; not to play with the impossible. Good-bye."

With a quick movement she gathered up her flowers and turned to go. Michael got to his feet.

"What do you mean? We shall meet again! We *must* meet again." How could he let her go—his dream-lady for whom his soul was afire? It was sheer impossibility. "We shall meet again," he repeated.

She looked at him wistfully across the sheaf of flowers, and he beheld sorrow in her eyes, though her lips smiled.

"Perhaps," said she, "we may meet once again—if you will come."

How could *she* let him go, the only man that she could honor? That was Julia's thought.

"I will come to the world's end."

"There is no need of that! We will meet here—"

"To-morrow then—at the same hour."

For a little she stood there like a bird about to take wing; then, turning, she ran swiftly down the slope. The wind caught her hair so that it fell in a stream from the crown of wild roses; the white of her ankles, the curve of her arm gleamed; the sunlight wrapped her in gold dust. In truth she seemed fay.

CHAPTER XVI

BY THE LAKE

NO longer able to fetter his impatience, Sir Michael found himself soon after five o'clock on the following afternoon squeezing his body through the breach in the Manor wall. All night he had dreamed wild dreams concerning his meeting with Julia, all day he had chafed at the leaden-footed hours; now his mind was packed with surmises anent the meeting of to-day. The thought that she was to come only to say "Farewell" scarcely troubled him; in his heart he felt that, do what she would, come what might, it was not possible that they should never meet again. He had shown her his love and she — or so he imagined — had only hidden hers; and though she had protested — and she had been in earnest — that she would not see him again, had he not overruled? There was comfort in that.

Sir Michael passed through the small ante-chamber of leafy gloom and so out into the sunlight; but to-day something was lacking, the world seemed empty, there was no elfish carolling — he shared the tree-walled embrasure with timid rabbits and a squirrel. So he sighed, raised his eyes to heaven in mute self-commiseration and sank down on a mole-hill — tolerably dejected. He was disappointed, you see, that his ladylove was not an hour before time at the trysting-place.

Before him the ground sloped smoothly away down to the lake, then rose again to the garden and the Manor.

Yesterday his eyes had swept over the scene noting the arrangement but none of the details; now, his gaze wandered over the sweep of turf — broken here or there by oak-trees rising from the earth like great green bubbles — over them, and down to the transparent blue of the reed-fringed lake. Then his eyes sought the house and rested there; that was the casket which held his jewel!

From the woodland it appeared gray and austere even beneath the sun's summer countenance; the windows stared black and sightless — there was no life here. To Michael it seemed like a skull wrapped around in a black shroud — the yew trees made the shroud. But that was a melancholy fancy — unneedful too; for though indeed the house appeared lifeless and forbidden even in the sun's gold, before it were streamers and flags of color that told of flowers growing against the sombre green and gray harmony of the walls.

It was for some while that Michael sat there dreaming, with the woodland sounds all around and before him the shallow bowl of the valley brimming with color. At most times he would have been content; now, I need not tell you, he chafed at the delay. A dozen times he plucked out his watch, a dozen times “pished” and “pshawed” at the march of time — at its lagging feet. Presently he rose impatiently; it was six o'clock. For a while he remained moderately calm, striding up and down on the turf, then, as the minutes glided by, his impatience overleaped itself; he resolved to be rash; he would go forward to meet Julia, and if not to meet, to find her. Wild fancies poured into his brain; for a moment all the hints and strange stories which he had heard concerning the Manor and its inhabitants clustered around him; he imagined harm being done to Julia

— danger threatening her. To his fantastic imagination the old house appeared to glare down upon him with baneful eyes.

Usually level headed and sane, during the last weeks — ever since, indeed, the eventful interview in London with Clothilde Chamby — Sir Michael had somewhat changed; the bodily wound and the heart wound had made him a creature rather of moods and minds. So, now, without much thought he started boldly down the slope in full sight of the Manor, disdaining even the momentary cover of the globular oak-trees. The sunlight made him an easy optical mark, but no thought of that entered his head; his mind was intent on her whom he desired to see, although he had no idea as to how he should proceed in order to gain that object.

So, he passed the lake, dreaming in the last kisses of the sun, and began to mount towards the house. The gardens were just before him, and now he could see that, though color flamed in masses, it was wild as a virgin woodland. The yew borders were untrimmed, weeds grew rampant on stone balustrades; two statues were well-nigh smothered in a tangle of roses. Yet though it was a ruin of a garden — uncared for, untended — there was in it a wealth of color and beauty; a garden, too, that held mystery, a garden of fable, a garden fit for the sleeping princess. In its way it was perfection.

Sir Michael was within a dozen paces of the lowest terrace when he was brought to a halt, pulses beating. Julia was running through the labyrinth of garden toward him.

In a moment she was at his side; her fingers clutching his arm; her eyes searching his.

“What are you doing here?” she questioned im-

periously. "Quick, tell me! I saw you from the windows — you must go — my father will be angry — I gave you no permission to follow me to the house. I said that I would meet you on the hill — perhaps. It was impossible. Tell me why you have come?"

"I was weary of waiting; I longed to see you, to speak to you. Why this mystery, what should I do? If you wish I will go straight to Mr. Vane, tell him what there is to tell — explain."

"Explain!" she spoke more softly, yet her fingers were taken from his arm; she had drawn back. "There can be no explanation. I have met you three times — in London (a wordless encounter), at the inn, and yesterday. To-day we planned to meet again — secretly; it was wrong of me — wrong — wrong! I understand that now. But I wanted to see you once more to say 'good-bye.' I knew that you loved me; the thought of a good man's love made me mad. Last night I dreamed — to-day — What am I saying?"

She broke off suddenly, a look of amazement, almost of horror, came to her eyes; she turned away with a little moan.

"You were saying what I longed to hear. Nothing is wrong. You have owned that you loved me, you know that I love you. Julia, will you be my wife?"

He went toward her, took her hand, stooped to kiss it. Her face was half-turned from him, but he could see the perfect curve of her cheek, the quivering lashes. Around them the evening lay purple and gold; from the garden came wafted the scent of roses and of lilies; everywhere chorused the birds. So they stood, a moment of rapture, then she plucked away her hand and turned to him.

"You are asking the impossible; you do not know, you *must* not know; but it is folly — madness."

He saw that there were clashing in her soul; things of which he knew nothing; in her eyes he beheld the struggle. It made him yearn more passionately for her; to guard, to serve, to cherish.

Her voice shivered the stillness.

"You must go, dear — forever. Believe me, you can do me no good — only harm. I am here a prisoner, you must not tempt me to escape. Try to think that I know best; try to forget. Believe me, I am grateful from my heart; believe — if you will — that I love you; believe also that my love is unworthy of you — and forget. For a day, one delirious day, I have known what love is — what a pure love is. I have known a certain happiness — that is enough for me."

Michael had listened like a man condemned, hearing the sentence of death; for, as the words fell from her lips, he felt that her determination was irrevocable, knew that her mind was fixed, question, dissuade, plead as he would. Her words carried decision, bore finality. It was as if Fate spoke.

Yet to leave her when their love and their life together should be beginning, thus to end it, thus to shatter all his hopes — it seemed impossible. He must, I think, have looked into her eyes — those eyes glimmered with tears — then glanced round at the glory of June, and the colors must have seemed dead, the lilting voices of bird-land harsh, the sun lifeless.

Then he bent and once again took her hand.

"Julia, I plead."

But as he knelt he saw, though vaguely, the barrier that was between them. He saw, I fancy, the finality

in her eyes; was aware of some secret, unknown to him, that to her mind was omnipotent, and though his heart yearned, his soul longed for her, the tender pleading, the sorrow, the mystery of her eyes went far toward convincing him. Yet how could he leave her, crush all her new-born love, cast aside the sweetest birthright of mankind, trample beneath his feet the clear gift of Heaven?

Once he pressed her hand to his lips; then he rose to his feet — still uncertain, still unknowing if indeed this were life-long farewell.

But here, as he stood wavering, distraught at the parting of the ways, Fate took the matter into her assured grasp and forced decision.

From the flagged pathway of the Manor came the sound of soft, shuffling footsteps and a voice called harsh and peevish:

“Julia, Julia!”

Mr. Vane was before them.



ONCE HE PRESSED HER HAND TO HIS LIPS.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. VANE IN THE RÔLE OF NEMESIS

IN the stress and play of emotion neither had noticed the slow, dragging footsteps of the old man as he descended the terraces, and now, having emerged from the gloomy yews as a mole from the earth, he appeared with the suddenness of an apparition. There he stood at the head of the shallow steps, one hand on the moldering balustrade, the other resting heavily on his stick. How his limbs were quivering with excitement, his eyes fierce with anger! To Michael he looked exceedingly virulent. Lured by the magic of the evening he had come on one of his rare rambles through the garden, only to find his daughter with a strange young man conversing earnestly, standing close, eyes bent. It was a little compromising, I confess.

"Julia," called old Vane again—they turned abruptly to him. "What are you doing? Tell me, who is this fellow? What is the meaning of his presence here?"

The forbidding mouth shut firm as a trap when he had spoken; his beetle brows were drawn tight together.

For a moment Julia was dumb (as who would not be in the circumstances) then, motioning Michael to follow, she walked toward her father. They were within five paces or so of him when she gave a little gasp and stopped.

Mr. Vane rattled his cane on the stones.

"Quick, girl, quick! What are you doing? Dropped your handkerchief, eh? Leave the rag. Can't you find it? You're as blind as an owl — there it is."

It was a clever manœuvre, for as Michael stooped to pick the handkerchief from the ground, she whispered in his ear:

"What is your name?" and he had whispered back: "Michael Stanton, Baronet."

With the square of cambric restored, Julia advanced; her lips were smiling.

"Father," said she, even-toned, "this is Sir Michael Stanton."

For a moment Mr. Vane looked from one to the other perplexed. Then:

"Indeed," he grunted, "and who the devil may Sir Michael Stanton be, and how do you come to know him?"

On the crest of the moment Michael himself intervened; he had seen that Julia was seeking for something to say, some excuse, something that would not excite suspicion.

"Sir," quoth he, "I had the honor of meeting your daughter at supper."

"At supper!" roared Mr. Vane.

"It was, sir, in this wise. I was on my way from London westward — *en route*, as they say, to my property in Devon. On nearing Salisbury we — that is my servant and myself — were unfortunate enough to run into the teeth of a violent storm, yet were lucky enough to find ourselves near the 'Hut Inn'; which, if memory serves me, is not far from Winterslow. There we sought and found shelter; and there also your daughter, Mis-

tress Julia Vane, was tarrying, bound by the weather. It chanced that there was no private room available, so we supped together."

Sir Michael had of set purpose spoken in a manner almost stilted, with a precision, a courtliness. At the conclusion he bowed.

"Very good, very good — so far," frowned old Vane. "But this, sir, does not explain your presence at Fovant-Chamberlayne."

Julia with a little catch of her breath moved forward.

"Father, surely it is no affair of ours what Sir Michael may do? He is staying, I believe, at the 'Arms' and — and wandered here."

"Ah, so you are staying at the 'Arms'? And what the deuce, if I may ask, makes you stay at such a miserable hole as the 'Arms'?"

The irritability, the brusqueness of the old man annoyed Sir Michael; his grimy, seedy appearance revolted him; yet he felt that for Julia's sake he must guard his temper, answer with well-oiled words. But it irked.

"It is necessity, sir. 'A man with an ounce or two of lead just through him —"

He paused, Julia had made a quick movement. But when he turned he found her composed, a smile upon her lips.

"Well, sir, and how did you get the ounce of lead sent through you? It happened to me once — gad, but it hurt!"

"I was unlucky enough to fall in with your local Dick Turpin. Riding alone I was not a match for Wild Will."

"Wild Will!" roared Mr. Vane with extraordinary vehemence.

"Wild Will it was, they tell me, though personally I had no previous acquaintance with the gentleman. But it seems pretty sure 'twas he."

So Sir Michael. In his surprise at Mr. Vane's enraged features, he did not notice that Julia's face had blanched — that she was shivering like a wind-blown poplar.

"And when was this?" The old man spoke with difficulty, his voice was husky; he had been seized with a paroxysm of anger — it was leaving him slowly.

"More than two weeks back as far as I remember; but here days pass as unreckoned as on a dial. The date I cannot recall, but it was a day of thunder."

"Ah, as I thought — as I thought." The old man nodded his head as if assured of something to his taste. Outwardly he was a little calmer but the fires of passion, of choking choler, still smoldered in his eyes. Then he looked up keenly. "And of how much," said he, "did this fellow lighten you?"

"Father," cried Julia, "Sir Michael may not wish —"

"Believe me," said Michael, "I have no desire for secrecy. He robbed me of two hundred pounds."

"Was that the exact sum? — you will pardon my curiosity."

"That was the exact sum."

"Two hundred pounds — eh? Two hundred —" the old man stopped short in the midst of his musings, paused and scratched his nose with a dirty forefinger; his eyes were half closed.

By now the dusk had crept stealthily around them; the sunlight had fled from the little valley — only the skies were of a transparent, sunlit blue. The world seemed very silent for a time as they stood there in the

lilac shadows; then Andrew Vane's voice broke in — harsh as a raven's croak.

"Julia, go and see if all is ready for supper; remember Mr. Bulstrode will be here soon."

At sound of the old man's words Julia had started; then, casting a swift look at Sir Michael, she turned to do as her father commanded.

But Sir Michael could not submit to that.

"Good-night, Mistress Julia," said he.

At his words she paused, half turned and curtsied; then rising, moved forward to the steps. Up between the dingy yew-trees and the glamour of the flowers she passed — into the blue dusk.

The sound of her footsteps died; a moorhen called from the rushes by the cooling lake.

"Now, sir," began Mr. Vane, "let us continue, if you please, our conversation. You will agree with me that ours was not a subject to discuss before young girls. These rascally fellows who pester the country with their neat-turned nags, their frippery of clothes, their handsome faces and their brave doings, grip the imagination of one's daughters, even of one's wife — though, thank God, I haven't one to plague me! But now, since my daughter is gone, you will vastly oblige me if you tell me further of the adventure. Here we learn no news; I myself am of a retiring disposition, seeking no society, and my single friend — Mr. Bulstrode of Bowerchalke — has not visited me for some while. I am, therefore, ignorant of this last outrage of Wild Will's. . . . You say, sir, that you were lightened of two hundred pounds; was that the exact sum which you carried? You will not, I trust, consider me too curious — to a recluse news is news."

Michael was somewhat astonished at the change that

had come over Mr. Vane; from a creature of moroseness, he was changed to one all affability. Now — beneath the mask of sordidness, under the grimness, the vinous aspect of his features, the shabbiness of his clothing — it was possible to find something of breeding, some traces of the gentleness, and though the greedy curiosity piqued him Sir Michael replied more or less willingly.

“No, in one thing I must commend the fellow; although I carried eight hundred odd pounds, I was lightened of but two hundred —”

With an oath old Vane banged his cane on the stone steps.

“Indeed, sir, you may consider yourself with the devil’s own luck; eight hundred, and he took but two hundred! Gad, I’ve never heard of such a thing —”

“Yes, I was fortunate,” remarked Michael. This old reprobate somewhat sickened him.

“But surely, sir, it was a deuce of a sum to ride with unprotected — you may consider yourself well through the job.”

“Perhaps; yet to be eased of two hundred guineas is not a pleasing occurrence; though, I admit, ’twas not wise to carry such a gold mine. The fact is, I had won at cards the night before in town and, leaving somewhat hastily, took my gainings with me.”

“Ah, you play?” A new light shone in Vane’s eyes — the gambler’s lust. “You play — so should all men, by gad! so should all men. I tell you, I was a rare one with the cards and the dice-box in old days — how I remember nights — and days too — at White’s, at the — Ah! you play, sir? — I’m glad of that. I trust that I may have the pleasure — the honor — of shuffling a pack or throwing the winking ivories with you;

not but what I am now, sir, a moderate player — a player for enjoyment, not for gain. Perhaps you will stay to-night, sup with me and Bulstrode — a rattling fellow I assure you — eh? ”

But Michael had had sufficient of the seedy old rascal, this senile old monster whose thoughts wandered in a maze of drink and gaming.

“Another night, sir, I shall be delighted, but permit me to refuse this evening. I am still somewhat weak from my adventure, and I trust that I shall have other opportunities of seeing you. I have decided to remain at the ‘Arms’ until I am sufficiently well to satisfy not only myself but also Dr. Bainby. The place charms me, and now — your acquaintance being made and having the *entrée* to the Manor — I am still more attracted to it.”

So Sir Michael; somewhat formally.

“Gad, man, you delight me — come when you like — come when you like. I can always promise you a pack of cards, tobacco and good enough liquor, though at times the fodder is indifferent.”

“Believe me, I am not exacting.”

Sir Michael forced a smile.

Then came an interruption — not unwelcome. A man appeared on the terrace, and in a moment he was at their side. Old Vane turned in the act of taking a stupendous pinch of snuff and stretched out a skinny hand.

“Good-day, Bulstrode — glad to see you. Allow me — this is Sir Michael Stanton, the hero of that fellow Wild Will’s last adventure.”

The two men bowed — the newcomer with affability, Sir Michael curtly; truth to tell, Bulstrode did not prepossess him. He saw a great bulk of a man, tallish,

broad, thick in the calf, bulky in the thigh. The face was handsome in a way, certainly; the dark eyes were fine, teeth white and set level, the nose well modeled; but, beside this, one saw that the skin was drink-soaked, the eyes wedged between puffy lids, that the lips were too full and coarse — there was too much of a pout in them. As a whole one would consider him a splendid animal of a man.

The two bowed, I say, and Michael stretched out his hand to Vane without more ado.

“Good evening,” said he, “I must be going. I trust soon to meet you again — and your friend also, Mr. Bulstrode.”

Vane did not attempt to keep him — perhaps saw that it would have been useless.

“Yes, yes, we’ll meet at cards, I hope, and over a glass of claret. You can vouch for my claret, eh, Bulstrode? You should know it well — the gallons you have flung down your throat —”

Bulstrode chuckled.

“A good enough place, though Bacchus’s stomach would not turn at it,” laughed he.

“Huge praise,” said Michael as he turned away, “but not too high I have no doubt. Good-evening.”

“Good-evening.”

Sir Michael descended to the lake and then mounted towards his secret entrance to the park. At the summit of the little hill he paused to look back. Below him lay a dull harmony of purple shadows broken, in a spot, by the eerie glimmer of the lake; the sky was cooling to a dense sapphire, only the west shone faintly yellow — an acrid yellow — where the sun had fallen.

One light gleamed from the Manor — even as he looked the burning square was obscured. He fancied

that Julia stood leaning for a moment from the window. Then, as he waited, the sound of laughter echoed dully from the valley; with a shudder he turned to the woods — a prayer in his heart.

Imagine his Julia with those men!

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. VANE THREATENS

AT supper — a meagre supper served by old Jane, the mute — Julia sat silent and abstracted, replying shortly to her father's thinly veiled gibes, or to Bulstrode's clumsy compliments; her thoughts were elsewhere. With the opening of a new bottle of claret she rose from her chair and with a curtesy bade them "good-night"; and, though entreaties and protestations fell around her, she walked to the staircase — a slim, white-clad figure — and mounted to her room. Once there she shot the bolt across the door and, moving to the window, leaned out into the silver darkness.

For to-night she would let her thoughts run peacefully; she was trampling on the knowledge that to-morrow she must face her father, confess that the two hundred pounds which she had given him as the price of the jewels had been taken from Sir Michael; confess, too, that she had let slip the opportunity of taking more than four times that sum; it would be a fierce ordeal she knew.

But now her mind was busy with the thought that Fate was ruling her life, willy-nilly. Strive how she might against loving Michael, against the desire to keep him near her, the struggle had been unavailing; for at the moment of parting, when it seemed that the links of their lives were to be completely severed, Fate had

welded them firmly. And, though her soul drooped at the thought of what lay before her — before them — her heart sang to the delirious old melodies of Hope and Love.

As the hours passed she heard, echoing from below, the voices of the two men — Bulstrode's loud laugh, the shouting of a snatch of song, the querulous whine of her father's voice; once came the crash of breaking glass. She guessed that they were drinking deep and playing high and, though now she was undressed and was abed, sleep fled from her; her thoughts were racing.

She lay — the window open, the curtains thrust aside — watching the moon glide stealthily across the sky, watching the shifting patch of light on the floor, the illumination and the obscuring of objects in the room. It was a small place set toward the garden and the lake, plainly, almost sparingly, furnished; yet Julia loved it; it was her world, like the woods and the hills — the rest of the Manor, somehow, did not seem to belong to her. On a table near the window she kept always something of Nature; there in a bowl she placed the first shy snowdrops, the early primroses and wild hyacinths and, as the year lapsed, the bowl was sweet with virginal lilies or the simple folk of the fields — cuckoo-flowers, eglantine or marigolds. In this room, too, were the few books which she had taken from the library; they were set in a row on the mantelshelf. There stood Shakespeare, Spenser and Chaucer, Snyder's *Arcadia*, a volume of the *Spectator*, Bacon's essays — of which she had read a few — a volume of Greek tales, Marvell's sonnets, and a pamphlet concerning travels in Italy and the Orient.

The room was situated at a corner of the house — the opposite corner to that which, on the floor below,

contained the library — and possessed, besides the large window, two doors, one opening into the corridor, the other into a suite of disused, echoing rooms, which occupied the east wing of the Manor. They were gaunt, faded apartments with few furnishings; in one, tapestry hung rotting from the walls; in two, were huge oaken bedsteads carved with monsters and nymphs, flowers and fruit, which belong to the bounteous reign of Elizabeth. There were also bleared mirrors, cupboards, hosts of tenantless chairs, yawning chimneys, all was, in fact, somewhat pompous in this suite — in these pristine “best” apartments of the Manor.

In earlier days — that is when Julia was sixteen or so — she had dreaded them, feared their silences, been awed by the stillness; in her youthful imagination they were peopled with phantom inhabitants; she fancied ashen-faced dames sleeping in the vast beds, ghostly abigails tripping to and fro; in the small parlor she knew that a vapory cavalier strummed on the harpsichord. She would have heard him, but for the fact that the notes were dumb with age — all but C and F in the lower scale.

In those days she had shuddered to think that only a locked door stood between her and the ghost world; now she derived some strange comfort from the thought of these void rooms. Sometimes, indeed, on moony nights such as this, she unbarred the door and slipped through into the unknown; sought for, rather than dreaded, these spectres. With no light but the moonshine she walked from room to room on careful feet; rats scurried, she saw her white-clad figure reflected in the mirrors — how she had started when first she had viewed that pale image of herself — but nothing more. Now, to-night, when she had long lain sleepless, with all her

senses active, the wish came to wander again in those silent rooms, to seek comfort from their silence,

It must have been midnight when she sprang softly from the bed — like a hare from her form — and sought the key in its secret hiding-place, behind a loose brick in the chimney. There lay two keys; one for the door, the other for an oaken chest which held the tell-tale signs of her manhood — breeches and coat, wig and pistols — the insignia of Wild Will. These she thought wise to keep inviolate, even from old Jane's rheumy eyes.

She had plucked the key from its hiding-place and was about to move to the door when she paused; a loud gust of sound came up from below — angry voices; Bulstrode's throaty and ferocious, her father's shrill and querulous. She had heard altercation, a shouted oath, the crash of glass on other nights when they had played long, but now instinct told her that it was different.

During, perhaps, five minutes the voices rose and fell, while Julia stood listening; then came a final torrent of words and the heavy slam of a door — Bulstrode, she guessed, had gone.

Another space of time slipped by and Julia heard the shuffling footstep of her father in the corridor; he was mumbling to himself in broken sentences. Then:

"Julia, Julia, let me in, girl."

The voice, the unexpectedness of it, startled Julia, close wrapt as she was in the events of the evening, the stress of the day, the horror of the night. Hastily she snatched a coverlet from the bed and wrapping it over her nightdress moved to the door. The key had slipped from her fingers.

"Is that you, father?"

A moment's silence, a quick-drawn breath and —
"Let me in, d'you hear?"

Fearful, Julia shot back the bolt and opened the door; old Vane entered. He carried a candle in his hands; there were cascades of tallow on his fingers; by its quivering light Julia saw that he had been drinking heavily — more heavily than usual. His face was blotched with hectic patches of crimson, his eyes blazed — there was anger in them; his mouth was grimly shut.

Julia, a frail, white-clad figure with her hair falling in a cloak around her shoulders, drew back.

“What is it?” she gasped.

For answer old Vane tottered across the floor and sank into a chair; as he passed her she took the candle from his nerveless fingers and set it down. For a time he sat there, mumbling to himself, then with a visible effort he raised his eyes and pointed a lean, snuff-grimed finger at Julia.

“Julia,” said he, “I am come for an explanation; you must tell me the truth. I’ll not be deceived. What is the meaning of this story that Sir Michael was robbed by Wild Will of two hundred pounds — where is the money? The truth, mind — the truth.”

The drink that he had gulped down seemed to have affected him little; he was perfectly wit-possessed, perfectly aware of what he was saying, of what he was desiring — yet, despite that, his speech and his thoughts were drink inflamed.

“I gave it to you.”

It was Julia now; she spoke evenly.

“To me?”

“It was truth when I told you that I received two hundred and sixty pounds for the jewels which I sold; but to appease you I stole money from Sir Michael — I knew that he carried money with him — and gave it

— two hundred pounds — to you. That was my deception — there is my explanation.”

“And do you expect me to believe that, to swallow these fables? But that we can discuss at other times — at other times. Now, to this point. Sir Michael told me that you refused to take eight hundred pounds from him — that you gave it back. You have thrown good gold away, when it could have been had for the asking. Eight hundred pounds — think — eight hundred winking coins — and you have let them slip. With it I might have appeased Bulstrode, with it I might have won back what I have lost —”

“What you have lost?”

“— what I have lost to Bulstrode — two thousand pounds.”

The admission came suddenly, as if the knowledge so tormented his mind that, of necessity, the words were driven forth. And now, when he had spoken, his head fell forward on his breast. He was stricken.

“Two thousand pounds! You must pay it!”

The knowledge had come to Julia as a surprise, for, until now, the gains and losses had been trifling when her father played with Bulstrode — the miser’s blood ran strong in him, and the chance that his hoard might fritter away had kept the cravings of the gambler in subjection. Now it had broken forth, he had cast aside the cloak of avarice and parsimony — the older instinct had conquered.

“Pay it, Julia! are you mad? Pay two thousand pounds! It’s not possible. What? — D’ye think I’m made of gold; that I can give away guineas as if they were old corks! It would ruin me — ruin me; it’s impossible — unthinkable — I’d kill him first. No, no;

it is you who must pay — you. Bulstrode has given me that chance — you must consent to marry him — consent within the week — or he must have the money.”

Julia drew back, her cheeks scarlet. He would sacrifice his daughter to pay a debt of honor! She felt sickened; she spoke with difficulty.

“ You have threatened me before — once I feared you enough to make me obey — you made me rob; you have made me base — have made me hate myself. Now I fear you no longer — now I will no longer obey, because to obey would be to sin against Nature. You must save yourself, for I swear that I will never marry Daniel Bulstrode.”

For a moment the old man sat petrified in the chair, his fingers gripping the arms, his eyes staring, shocked from their bleariness, piercing Julia. Then, as she stood there beautifully defiant, he rose and came toward her.

“ What, girl, you dare to disobey? I warn you, Bulstrode has asked you as his wife, but he shall have you as —”

He stopped midway, clutched at his throat, and tottered in a heap to the floor.

CHAPTER XIX

AGAIN AT THE MANOR

THE next day—that is, during the twenty-four hours following his visit to the Manor—Sir Michael cooled his heels and heated his brain; I mean, his brain was racing, his feet inactive. He spent most of the time musing in the apple-orchard—a discontented specimen of mankind.

On the following morning Pierre—the admirable Pierre, of whom, I assure you, I tell far too little—brought him a rag of a note; a crumpled thing, ill-written and ill-sealed. Dumb Jane, it seemed, had come with it from the Manor. As he lay abed, Sir Michael opened it; within, on a grimy sheet, he found this:

THE MANOR.

24th June.

SIR,—Unfortunately, owing to a slight indisposition, I found it impossible to invite you here yesterday. To-night, however, I shall be honored by your presence to supper at eight o'clock; and afterward I trust you will take a hand with me at cards.—Your humble servant,

ANDREW P. VANE.

P. S.—Do not, I beg, trouble to reply."

To Sir Michael Stanton, Bart.

The letter—written in a large scratchy hand, difficult to decipher, wavy in alignment—fluttered from

Sir Michael's hand; a smile was just flickering at his lips, a frown catching at his brows. He was perplexed at the whole situation; he was moreover anxious; he hated to think of the life that Julia must lead with those two men — Bulstrode and Vane. To his mind the Manor seemed a prison, with a base jailor, while, over all, he felt instinctively, hung some secret, some mystery.

All yesterday, in thought, he had re-enacted the scene in the garden — that twilight scene — when their love was hanging in the balance, when she had hinted that a barrier was between them, that love was impossible; and the moment haunted him in which she had almost conquered, in which she was driving his love from her, in which she was battling against herself — in her own mind battling for right, he could swear. The pathos and pleading in her eyes, the certitude of her voice had made him waver; had, for a little, made him doubt her love; like a child, with superior wisdom commanding, he had been on the verge of submitting himself — then the power to decide had been snatched from him. Now he was determined; now, after that intervention of Fate, Providence, Chance — call it as you will. To-day he felt that nothing — God alone — could separate him from Julia. The links of their lives were fastened indissolubly together, not to be broken. Love was love.

There was one mild excitement that day, one spark of news for Sir Michael in the slow procession of hours. Pierre again was the Lucifer.

He came to Sir Michael as he sat under the apple-trees, a printed sheet in his hand. It seemed that mine host — a competent fellow of sound business capacities and no conversation — had thought that it might interest his guest.

"There is the warrant, sir, against Wild Will," said Pierre impartially.

Michael — he was in a silent mood that afternoon — took it without a word and forthwith read the good black type. It ran thus:

"The City of New Sarum, in the County of Wilts. The twentieth day of June, in the year of Grace 17—.

"Whereas diverse robberies have lately been committed on the road between Sarum and Shaftesbury, and likewise in the vicinity of Wilton, by some fellow unknown, commonly called Wild Will, a reward of fifty guineas is offered for apprehending and bringing to justice this said Wild Will over and above the reward allowed by Act of Parliament. The said fellow is about five feet six inches in height, he wears a wig and a mask. He is usually mounted on a black mare.

"GOD SAVE THE KING."

When finished Sir Michael folded the sheet and looked up.

"Wild Will must mind his ways," said he.

"Yes, sir, and soon. Monsieur the landlord, says that the officers of the law — the excisemen, *n'est-ce pas?* — look for him."

"He seems an odd rogue, this Wild Will, to risk his neck for a groat when he might have a guinea — to take two hundred pounds when he might have had eight hundred pounds, to be polite and shoot a man in the shoulder. And no one seems to know where he comes from; there has been no new gossip, eh, Pierre?"

"No, sir, there is nothing of news. He has been quiet since your honor was caught."

That somehow pricked Sir Michael's vanity; he was silent, and Pierre departed. But the ball of thought

had been set rolling; a ball which for some days had been stationary and overlooked, though, as a matter of fact, Sir Michael took little interest in this elusive highwayman. He had been robbed of two hundred guineas and riddled with a bullet; to him it was unimportant as to who was the perpetrator of these deeds — whether it was Wild Will, Naughty Ned, or a civic watchman! 'Twas done, not to be undone; and he was not sufficiently vindictive to care a finger-snap as to what became of the rascal.

Now, as it happened, speculation on the subject for a while aroused his interest, then wearied his mind and would, doubtless, have sent him to sleep had not these thoughts led — and what else could be expected? — to thoughts of Julia. Had she not remonstrated with him, begged him to cease when he had spoken of the highway fellow? Of course! — That was interesting — he wondered why — and so he wandered into the paths of Love's garden, where, for the moment, we may leave him.

That evening he found Julia by the lake, seated on a fallen tree. He came up softly behind her, his heart beating with joy. He was almost at her side before he spoke — his footsteps had been muffled in the turf. Then:

“ Julia! ”

She rose with a little cry and came toward him. In a moment he had taken her in his arms and kissed her. Her protests he stopped.

“ No,” said he as he held her; “ I will listen to no pleading to-night. Two days since, when you pleaded, I confess to you that I wavered, I thought that, perhaps, you did not love me, that it was right for me to

go; now I know that it would have been wrong — a sin. Whatever you may say, whatever you may have to tell, in my eyes will be nothing; however high the barrier that lies between us it can be overstepped; however deep the gulf it can be bridged. You may confess — though I believe that there is nothing for which to ask forgiveness, believe that you are struggling with a phantom — or you may leave me ignorant; tell me what you will or leave it untold all your life. It is the same to me — there can be nothing of which you could be ashamed. To me you are for the moment and for the future; like Nature, like great art, I want none of your history; you are just there — something to be loved and to be revered, almost to be feared. No, no — I must speak, must tell you. . . . Now that I have found you I want nothing but you; all else is a frame that gives added beauty to the picture; God painted the picture. How should I care to know its vicissitudes? It is for me to confess, to beg forgiveness; from you I ask for nothing but your love — your trust.”

The tide and passion of his speech ebbed and for long they were silent by the lake-side, his look was fixed on her; her hands lying passive in his. For a time she was all tender womanhood.

At length he saw the flicker of tear-hung lashes; her voice came soft but firm. Oh, the wonder of it!

“Michael (yes, I will call you that — once), do you remember how, two nights ago, I pleaded with you, how I battled against your love and how, when I had almost conquered, my father came? It seemed Fate, and bowing to it, I owned to myself that I loved you. Then, as I left you in the garden, my heart was throbbing with happiness. ‘Now,’ sang my heart, ‘Love has come, Love will take me’ — and you were love. I forgot the

barriers that lay in our path — I thought only of the goal. Then I knew happiness — true happiness; before I had only played at it, thinking the sham real —”

“And now you will have happiness for always all your life —”

“Hush! much has happened since then — on that night when Mr. Bulstrode was here. No, I can tell you nothing — now. Believe me, when I say that there is another barrier — insurmountable; believe me and obey when I tell you that you must go for always — after to-night.”

Her fingers slipped from his grasp, she drew back; her eyes looked straight at his. Then, to her mind, flashed the thought that though once he had obeyed — or rather been on the verge of obeying — her commands, now, when he had tasted the sweet fruit of her cheek, when he had thrilled to his soul at the touch of her, he would not obey again; would not let her go.

“Julia,” said he gravely, “you know that it would be impossible.”

Then he was silent. What was there to add?

For a little she faced him straightly. Then her lips parted, she smiled, her teeth showed between the crimson; a laugh — a fay laugh — pealed forth.

“Sir Michael,” said she, “to love me is possible — how can I prevent it? — but to marry me — that is not to be hoped for.”

And turning, she fled — light-foot as a nymph of spring — up the slope to the garden. But as she threaded the dusky labyrinth sobs shook her; her hands were pressed hard against her heaving bosom.

CHAPTER XX

THREE MEN

FOR long Sir Michael stood motionless beside the lake, his mooning eyes fixed on the garden and the yew arch through which Julia had fled; her laughter ringing mocking in his ears. That laugh had somewhat wounded him; the thought weighed that he must fight again for his love, again besiege the citadel of her heart, again break through the fortifications of her protests. A feeling of foreboding was over him; he could not banish the thought that there lurked some secret danger, which he would be powerless to avert, because of his ignorance.

The minutes flew; the wise sun was falling behind the hills; the hazy gold was turning to blue; a cool breath came from the lake. He turned from the lake with something near a shiver; he would follow Julia to the house.

As he threaded his way through the garden he noted carefully each small vista, each grouping of color, each foot of the path; for him all these things were sacred. Julia had lived here, among them; planted, perhaps, those flowers, rested against that moss, climbed that balustrade, brushed aside those sweeping branches — for her sake he loved every leaf and petal which grew near her, even the humble weeds — had not her feet pressed them in passing? Believe me, he was a true lover.

Arrived at the terrace that spread itself before the

house, he paused, uncertain how to proceed. The walls and roofs of the Manor rose straight before him, the windows, curtainless and blank, peered down inquisitively at the intruder; one only stood open — surely that must be Julia's? To his left the sombre yews, like Calvinists, came close to the wall; the terrace indeed ended there, with a stone seat fashioned in a *demi-lune* — he turned, therefore, to his right. Even in the liquid air of the summer evening the desolation, the forlornness of the place struck him; the gray old Manor surrounded by the funeral yews and the almost Bacchanal riot of flowers appeared, in his melancholy mood, like a skull decked with cypress and roses.

On the eastern façade of the house he found a garden door gaping wide at the top of a flight of shallow steps. Unhesitating, he entered — ceremony was difficult here.

Within, in spite of the heat and burning of summer days, the air struck chill, the room, uncarpeted and with the furniture heaped pell-mell in a corner, had a ghostly look; he would have felt little surprise had he beheld shades huddled at the vacant hearth. With a quick glance around he crossed the echoing boards and passed out at another door. Beyond the portal he found himself in the gloom of a dingy passage; his feet fell soft on a carpet. He paused — his eyes blind with the transition from light to darkness — and, as he stood there, he heard voices speaking. They were close, and rose loud and angry, one harsh and blustering, the other shrill — Daniel Bulstrode's and Mr. Vane's it was apparent.

As Sir Michael again moved forward down the gloomy, passage it was the former who was speaking.

"I can wait, I tell you, no longer; you must give me the money or the —"

"Hush! there's someone coming," replied the other. Then, more softly: "Remember you promised a week —"

"Promised? Ha! promises —"

The speaker broke off abruptly. Michael had pulled aside the flimsy curtain which masked the opening of the passage and stood facing them.

The large hall was illumined by the rainbow light that filtered through stained-glass windows and the glow of a fire which burned wearily — as if irritated at the fact of its having been called into existence at this season — on the hearth.

In this atmosphere of mellow dusk Sir Michael beheld a lofty place, the roof of which reached two stories high; a place with a wide staircase mounting upward into shadows and ending with the suggestion of a minstrel's gallery; with dim portraits peering out of oaken walls and a huge chimney-piece decorated with a coat of arms done in tarnished gold and pigment. The floor was flagged, but almost covered by threadbare carpets — filched obviously from other rooms; while the only furniture was a narrow Jacobean table, a circular table near the fire, a settle and half a dozen promiscuous chairs and stools. The comprehensive expression was of forlornness and disuse; the curtain over the great door was half fallen from its rod, a piece of tapestry — on which archaic gentle-folk were hunting — hung half torn from the wall; the pictures were obscure with dust; the very air smelt moldy.

So much Sir Michael realised in the silence that followed his entrance; a silence in which only Bulstrode moved, and he was merely flapping his thick calf with a pair of gloves. There was somehow a constraint; it seemed as if Sir Michael had intruded at an awkward

moment, as if the words that he had heard — the words which they knew that he must have heard — formed part of a conversation of secrecy. Even when old Vane rose from his chair, shuffled forward and strove to put a smile on his lips, and to jerk out some words of welcome, he appeared strained — unnatural; it was the welcome made to the unwelcome.

“Delighted, Sir Michael, I’m sure,” began Mr. Vane clumsily. “Believe me, sir, I had no idea of the time — curse it, how it flies — no idea that the hour was so late. We were talking, discussing a slight matter — er — you know my friend, Bulstrode? His presence this evening is an unlooked-for — pleasure.”

He swallowed at the word.

“Yes, we met two days ago in the park. Good-evening.”

Thus Sir Michael.

“G’evening,” said Bulstrode, and continued to flick the bulge of his calf.

Then, to fill in the gap of silence, Sir Michael decided to offer an apology for the suddenness of his appearance.

“I fear, Mr. Vane, that I entered somewhat unexpectedly. I came, sir, as once before across the park — you have a convenient gap in the wall — then having traversed the garden — in which by the way you have a most excellent Diana, a charming piece — I arrived at the terrace and was at a loss to know how to make an entrance. I was on my way to the drive and principal façade of the house when I found an open door and entered. Please accept my apologies.”

“Sir, it was I who am to blame; it is for me to offer apologies. I should have been ready to receive you in the garden, I might have suspected that you would come

by the park — my daughter has told me of the hole in the wall. But I trust that you will excuse me; I seldom venture out even in summer time; gout is my tyrant — I suffer, you must know, infernally from the gout. So you came by the garden door? ”

Michael nodded at the old man's attempted affability.

“ And heard a bit of our conversation, eh? ”

It was Bulstrode who spoke, the voice came harsh and thick; he rolled his r's as do all Wiltshire men of the soil. For a moment the heavy face had lightened; the dull eyes flickered, the lips curled with boorish insolence. Some primitive instinct had told him that in Sir Michael lay a rival. In that, as we know, he was not wrong.

At the tone, rather than at the words, Sir Michael flushed; he curbed his voice with difficulty.

“ I regret, Mr. Vane,” said he, ignoring the other, “ that as I walked down the corridor — you will recollect that it is carpeted — I overheard a sentence or two of your conversation. I trust that it was not of a private nature.”

Old Vane glanced at Sir Michael quickly, his eyes blinking like a jackdaw's. How much had he heard? Bulstrode, too, was on the alert.

“ No, sir, no, it was scarcely private, but it is always wise not to let things go further than one need. Confound it no, there was nothing of privacy, eh, Bulstrode? ”

“ Believe me, Mr. Vane,” returned Sir Michael, somewhat on his dignity, “ I should repeat nothing which I might unwillingly overhear; particularly when such a conversation deals — as I imagine did yours — with the matter of — ”

“ Of? ” Bulstrode spoke sharply.

"A debt of honor."

"Ah!" came in a gasp from Vane. "A debt of honor."

Bulstrode laughed.

Again a silence, a constraint, fell on the trio in the dim hall. The air seemed heavy and hard to breathe, the fire was fast dying and only a gleam of late sunshine that pierced a gap in the encircling trees without came through the window. In vain Sir Michael listened for Julia's footsteps in the corridors above; he hoped for her presence to dissipate the gloom — the sense of foreboding which had settled on him. He longed for her to come and then to seize her in his arms and take her from this house of mystery, from these plotting creatures.

It was Mr. Vane that brought Sir Michael from his dreams: a strange sound, a throaty cry had come from his lips, and, looking, Sir Michael saw that the old man was trembling from head to foot — his eyes fixed on a splotch of crimson light which fell from the windows on the floor before him.

"Look, look," he cried, "there is blood at my feet!"

At the cry Bulstrode, with a glance, turned contemptuously from the old man, a sneer on his coarse lips; he was not a coward of that sort, he had not the superstition or the imagination to understand how any man could tremble at a spot of scarlet light, but, somehow, the terror of the old man silenced him, though the pitifulness of his fear made him smile.

It was Michael who spoke.

"Perhaps, Mr. Vane," said Michael carelessly, "I can explain why the sunlight, coming through a red quartering, falls where it does this evening. It is just past midsummer day and the sun, at the zenith of his jour-

ney northward, peers in more easily at your window."

A glimmer of understanding came in Vane's eyes.

"But — but — Lord save us, the sun never comes to these windows."

"Never except in June — always then; you have not previously observed. Indeed —"

But Bulstrode broke in, a grin on his face.

"You talk too much of science when you wish to explain away what is easy to read. Mr. Vane is correct; 'tis blood, spilt blood and hell-fire, too."

At the words, and the laugh which followed them, the old poltroon sank with a groan into his chair — the next moment there came the rustle of a woman's gown and Julia entered.

She stepped down from the gloom of the stairway — a white-robed thing of fantasy in the twilight — and went straight to her father.

"You are ill?" she questioned.

"No, girl, no — a little faintness. I am old. Give me some wine, Bulstrode." Then to Julia again.

"And the supper? — is it never to be ready?"

"I am going to help Jane bring it in, father."

There was, Michael marked, solicitude, tenderness in her voice — his heart swelled at her nobility.

"Yes, yes, quick, the supper — we must get to the cards — the cards."

He spoke more naturally now, yet as Julia moved away his bleary eyes wandered again to the dying patch of crimson on the floor — the crimson light produced by the sunbeams piercing the gules of a quartering.

CHAPTER XXI

ACROSS THE TABLE

WITHIN ten minutes Julia, aided by old Jane — a wrinkled, seamed old woman with wool-white hair and sharp bones, deaf and dumb as I have told you — had cleared the table, spread over it a cloth, and was preparing supper. All the while the three men stood silent. At first, when Julia had entered bearing a well-burdened tray, Sir Michael had endeavored to take it from her hands, but when she had shaken her head and old Vane had muttered: "Leave the girl alone, Sir Michael — she is used to it," he had desisted.

At length, when lighted candles were placed on the narrow table, Julia drew forward a chair and seated herself before some steaming dish.

"Supper is ready," said she.

With the dim oak rising behind her, the glow of the candles striking up on her face and on the red-gold of her hair, her white form framed in the darkness, she made a picture beautiful beyond words. Michael wished to worship at her feet; even Bulstrode, as he moved forward to the table, drew in his breath.

"By gad, Jule, but you're fine to-night!" he cried.

"You sit here, Sir Michael — here, next my daughter — and you there, Bulstrode; that's it — opposite. I will be your neighbor." Mr. Vane lowered himself carefully to his chair, and then turned his eyes to the dish. "What have you, Ju? Some measly stuff, I sup-

pose — no, Sir Michael, you must expect little here; but I can offer you wine — good wine — devilish good, I assure you. A man does not need much else if the liquor is drinkable. Canary or claret? The claret's excellent, I vouch — that bottle there — steady or you will spill — what color! That's the worst of the pewter — you can't see the light shine through the wine when it is on the way to your gullet. But mugs now and glasses after — we are serviceable here. You find it good? Better than this stew, no doubt."

When all were served, talk flagged — it was not a conversational household. Bulstrode ate and drank eagerly, but all the while his fierce eyes watched Julia, and Michael perceived that each time he lifted the tankard of wine to his lips he drank to her. Vane ate sparingly; Julia scarce at all. 'Twas evident that she loathed the man opposite her, with him near her spirit seemed crushed — fearful. The glow had gone from her eyes, the sweet natural gaiety and childish abandon from her spirit; to Michael she did not lift her eyes.

Suddenly Bulstrode spoke.

"So you were caught by that rascal Wild Will, sir? He's a fellow coming from nowhere — that's the almighty strangeness of it — not a soul has a hint where he hides."

"It seems, too, that he has no accomplices — no shelter." Sir Michael spoke casually.

"Stap me, if I understand it. Here he's been playing the deuce for more than a year, and no one's the wiser as to his lair. It seems he hasn't got one; though it ain't many who play the high toby without a snug inn and a band of helpers to turn to when the Law's running 'em hard — it's a devilish unhappy fox that hasn't an earth. But this fellow dances up from the

ground, and disappears again into it — so far as I know — when the job is done. But he'll have to look carefully now."

For the first time since the commencement of supper Julia spoke.

"Why?" she asked.

"You don't know? — but why should you, m'dear — a linnet doesn't know what is going on outside her nest. . . . You've heard the news, I'd swear, Sir Michael?"

"I've seen the warrant," said he.

A little gasp — nothing more than a swift intake of the breath — turned his and Bulstrode's looks to Julia; he fancied that her cheeks were paler — he did not err in that. Neither noticed old Vane.

"You have sympathy for him?" asked Sir Michael.

"A little; I have met him," she returned.

"Met him!" cried Bulstrode. "Zounds, here's a story! Listen, sir, your daughter has been meeting some cursed highwayman — a common robber. Where was the — the *first* meeting?"

"I met him on the downs," said Julia, pale as ice. Sir Michael imagined that she regretted her words.

"That was the first time — you have seen him since?"

"Yes — I have seen him since."

"And he fooled you like he fools all women. He spoke to you gallantly, eh?"

"He has never spoken to me, nor I to him." Her voice was firm, but there was fear in her eyes; her fingers were feverishly pleating a morsel of her gown.

"Seen him, but never spoken? O woman, woman!" Bulstrode leaned toward her. "To have met and never to have spoken! Strange — devilish strange. One

might as well have a cellar of wine and never drink. But now we shall see sport for there is a warrant issued against the fellow — don't you fear for him? A warrant, a remand, and excisemen are out — they will search everywhere, search and find, by gad! A pretty prospect for your lover, eh, madam?"

For a moment the drunken booby leered into her face, a smile on his lips, his eyes aflame with foolish jealousy. For a moment, I say, he sat there, his gaze fixed on Julia's scarlet cheeks, her quivering lips; then he felt the cool, pungent rush of wine cast full in his face, saw the room hazy through a ruby cloud, felt a smarting in his eyes. Michael had struck; he could endure it no longer.

For a moment Bulstrode was motionless, then, with an oath, he staggered up to his feet and, clutching the table edge with his fingers, leaned forward.

"Damn you, what do you mean?" he hissed.

Michael, too, had risen, he fronted the other, the empty tankard from which he had thrown the wine still in his hand.

"I should have thought, sir," said he, "that my meaning was plain; however, perhaps, I do not make sufficient allowance for your — temperament. But first, perhaps, I should apologise to Mr. Vane for my sudden act. Believe me, I had not forgotten that I was a guest in your house, but if you, sir, could sit dumb when your daughter was insulted I could not — no bonds of hospitality could fetter me. . . . And now, Mr. Bulstrode, if you were uncertain as to my intention I will say that I mean, that" — he pointed at the dripping wine, the dark stains on the cloth, the puce streaks on the other's face — "as a challenge. I —"

But here Julia — Julia who had sat till now some-

what as old Vane, as if numbed and powerless to move or speak — rose to her feet. Her breast was heaving, her eyes shone bright as stars though her lips were pale.

"Gentlemen," cried she, "I forbid it; I forbid you to fight for me. Mr. Bulstrode has, for the moment, forgotten himself; so, too, I think has Sir Michael. I need not repeat —"

But here another intervened. With a crash of his fist on the table, that sent a complaint from the bottles and tankards, Mr. Vane leaped forward. A cunning thought had flashed to his mind. A duel might be of advantage to him; if Sir Michael were the better swordsman Bulstrode might be shelved; his two thousand pounds would be saved.

"Julia," he croaked, "this is nothing to you — not for your ears. Go, girl, go."

With a little sob she drew back, hesitating. Her father scraped to his feet.

"Did you hear me? Go!"

With a tremor her eyes sought Michael's; then, as he slightly bent his head, she turned to leave them. Slowly she went across the hall to a door that was concealed in the shadows; Michael followed to turn the handle and pull back the panel. As she passed him, head bent, he stooped forward and whispered:

"Be in the garden — soon."

"Yes," she murmured, and was gone.

His heart throbbing with happiness — for surely now she had completely confessed her love — Sir Michael returned to the table. He found Bulstrode dabbing his face with a handkerchief; old Vane, seated again, mumbling unintelligible words. It was Sir Michael who spoke.

"It will not, I trust," said he, "be necessary for me

to repeat the challenge. Should you, however, still misunderstand my meaning I am at your service, Mr. Bulstrode. But I doubt if even you carry your passion of wine to the extent of wishing to wash your features in more than one pint of an evening."

But here Bulstrode came to life. A spark of spirit, fed, perhaps, by cowardice, prompted him; wine, too — not that which had incarnadined his cheek, but that which lay warm within — fired him.

"Curse you, sir, do you take me for a skulker? Do you think that I am less a man, less a gentleman, than you — that I don't understand the word 'challenge'?"

He spoke feverishly; Michael bowed.

"I am glad, sir, that I was deceived."

There was irony in that.

"What, you think me a coward? I will fight you when you wish, now, if you are ready; here with pistols — swords — carving knives — what you will; a horse-whip would be a good weapon — for you. You think this my first affair of honor — my first broil; come, pull down the skewers — there over the chimney. They will serve, and the place too — though the light is cursedly uncertain."

So he blustered; like many born cowards, he was playing the game of bravado, covering his cravenness with a false bragadoccio of words. With sheer fear he was strung up to mimic valor — a true paradox, I assure you; though in truth, at the thought of a bullet or ice-hot steel in his body he was a tissue of pusillanimity. Then, as Michael said nothing, he strode with an attempt at a swagger to the hearth and reached up at the two sheathed rapiers — twin streaks of metal — which hung, one above the other, against the oak. But with

his hand on the hilt he was powerless to lift them from the nails; his arm fell useless to his side.

There was a silence; Michael turned away with a gesture of impatience and fronted Vane, even the latter — despicable old creature that he was — turned against the poltroon. His weak lips curled, but his heart was beating quicker; here, perhaps, was a relief from his embarrassment, for should Sir Michael kill Bulstrode, his debt would be wiped out — even the knowledge of it would die with the creditor.

“You will find, Sir Michael,” said he presently, “those rapiers sharp; those and a couple of pistols I keep always ready for use. It is lucky! As to the light, I have fought in worse — once under a lanthorn a-swung from a chain. That was in Paris on a Christmas night — how I froze!”

Then, rising feebly to his feet, and still with the awakened memory in his mind — you could tell that from the look in his eyes — he crossed the floor to the chimney and unhitched the rapiers from the wall.

“There,” said he.

Bulstrode, with nerveless fingers, took one in his hand and, summoning his wits, pulled out the flexible length of steel: the sheath clattered to the floor.

“Sir Michael,” said Mr. Vane, and held out the other rapier by the point.

But Michael shook his head. Though his blood was boiling, his manhood in revolt against Bulstrode, with those words of slander hissing in his ears, he could not, for the moment, bring himself to fight; it would be murder — murder and folly. To-morrow — another day when the man was less shaken with cowardice ’twould be different, but now — ’twas stark impossible!

"Mr. Bulstrode," said he evenly, "I suggest that we should postpone our meeting until — until —"

But here the man gained momentary mastery of himself; a certain pride — or *nuance* of pride — came to him.

"Ah, you think," he cried huskily, "that I am incapable of meeting you! By the gods and devils let me tell you you're not the first man I've run a foot of steel into, yours will not be the first body that I've let daylight into. You —"

"Stop!" Mr. Vane held up his hand. "However willing, gentlemen, you may be to fight, there is another reason why you must postpone your butchery. I object. For the moment I did not realise, but, let me tell you, I will have no corpse here; nothing incriminating — there is enough already, God knows! You will oblige me, therefore, by meeting and fighting elsewhere than on my hearth-stone."

He spoke tersely, impressively; he was obviously in earnest. In truth, when he realised the nature of what was on the spur of being done, he was determined. He wanted no dead men in his house — no matter how slaughtered — now when the writ and the officers were out against Wild Will — out, that is, against his daughter. He would run no more risks.

To his speech Sir Michael bowed; then, turning to Bulstrode, he continued: "And, you, sir — when will it be at your convenience to settle this matter of our — dispute?"

He spoke curtly, his words and actions seemed stilted in dealing with this man. It was otherwise with Bulstrode; the reprieve from an immediate danger brought back a little of his courage; steadied his shivering

nerves. He could speak calmly, his teeth unclench, his eyes move from their stare.

"That, sir, is as you wish; for me the sooner it is the more 'twill please. 'Od's life, one wants to spit out filth so soon as possible, not to leave it clogging the teeth. When you will — here or at Bowerchalke."

"Not here!" Thus Mr. Vane.

Bulstrode shrugged. "As you like. Behind Fifield Ashes — up there on the downs — will suit me. You will bring a second?"

"I will so endeavor," said Michael. "When shall it be then? To-morrow — at sunset?"

A tremor moved Bulstrode's muscles, as a stone shivers the calm of a pool.

"I should prefer a day or two to — to find a second — to arrange matters."

"I should have preferred to-morrow — however, as you will. To-day is Thursday — on Sunday, then."

"The Sabbath!"

The hypocrisy sickened Michael.

"Monday, if you prefer — at dawn. Things such as these are best over."

"At dawn," echoed Bulstrode hoarsely.

Michael turned from him.

"And now, Mr. Vane," said he, "good-night. You will forgive my departure — believe me, I am in no humor for cards. Yet, I hope soon that I may again have the pleasure of visiting the Manor — I have, indeed, something important to request of you; meanwhile, let me thank you for your — hospitality (he paused for the flick of a second), and again — good-night."

Then he turned on his heel and moved to the entrance

through which he had come; with his hand on the curtain he paused.

“Remember, Mr. Bulstrode — at dawn.”

The words done, he dragged aside the curtain and walked forward into the dark.

CHAPTER XXII

A MOONLIGHT INTERLUDE

BY touch, rather than sight, Sir Michael found his way down the black corridor (with only a bluish glimmer at the further end to guide him), and thence through the vacant *salon*, out on to the terrace. Here the moonlight struck full on his face; it was as if he had plunged straight from some gloomy cave into a sea of liquid silver. And thus, coming from the darkness, he could see nothing distinct, no concrete forms; his eyes were only sensible to pale, mercurial waves and abysses of light. But soon things took shape; trees and shrubs, the ragged line of the yew hedge, the shadow-splashed flagstones, separated themselves.

Then, finding the stage vacant of her whom he sought, he walked to the angle of the house.

"Julia, Julia," he called softly, and, as he spoke, a figure slipped from the deep shadows and came toward him. A moment and his lips were close to hers, his arms clasping her.

"Beloved!" he whispered.

For a while they were silent, lulled by the peace, the rest after the brutal scene in the hall — secure in their sympathy. Then, with a little sigh, Julia broke from him.

"Michael," said she, her voice was grave, "before — before we seal the bond of our love I have much to say,

much to confess — things which I dread to speak — fear for you to hear.”

“Dearest, you are distraught, shaken; you can have nothing to tell me that is not all purity, all sweetness, all goodness —”

“No, no — would Heaven it were!”

The sadness of her voice arrested him; he searched her face with wonder in his eyes.

“Whatever it may be does not matter; you are mine — nothing can alter that. To-night must be all happiness — one hour of life. I wish to hear nothing.”

She shook her head.

“No,” she whispered, “I must tell. To-morrow, if not to-night, you must know everything — only then shall I be content. Even to-night I will tell you something, something to prove to you that my love is not new made; that it has been firm and strong since our first meeting by the woods. Come.”

Leading him by the hand she took him up to the balustrade which bounded the terrace. Her lips were smiling — she changed like April days.

“Look!” said she.

Below them lay the hushed labyrinth of the garden, silver and sable for the most part — a maze of moonshine and shade. But, here and there, tall June lilies stood resolute like incense-holders in the velvet gloom and, beneath the white pall of cluster roses, the naked shoulders of statues — the Diana and a laughing nymph — caught a tissue of light. Beyond, across the wilderness of the garden, a thin line of light told where lay the lake, like a sword-blade piercing the darkness.

Michael’s eyes swept over all, then glanced upward to the tender, star-strewn sky.

“Hark, how still it is! No air — no sound.”

"The world seems waiting."

"For what?"

"I know not — your anger perhaps."

He laughed joyfully: how could one doubt?

"Julia, you are wayward but compelling — I capitulate. You may leave the great confession till daylight; but the reason why now you have yielded to me, when two hours since you left me desolate, that I will listen to — to-night."

There was a gentle raillery in his tone; he spoke as if to a child, half-chiding, half-deprecating.

With a little sigh — she seemed all seriousness now — she seated herself on the balustrade, he beside her. The moon penciled the outline of her head in silver.

"Speak, O Sybil!" smiled he; and Julia, with eyes fixed at the blank windows of the Manor, began. All the while that she spoke she was motionless.

"Dear Michael," said she, "it is difficult; there is much to avoid to-night — things which you will know to-morrow. . . . Know then that my father and Mr. Bulstrode — no, don't speak — have been friends for many months now — more than a year. He came at first rarely, then more often — to supper, and afterwards to play at cards. I thought it natural, for I knew my father's passion for them, but soon I discovered that Mr. Bulstrode came because — because he loved me. A month passed, and my father told me that I was to marry him, and I refused. Then much happened, much, much — that which I shall tell you to-morrow, that which to-night I will omit. Now to recent days. Four evenings ago Bulstrode came again — you remember? — they played hard, recklessly; my father lost two thousand pounds. Late that night he came to my room — he was wild and furious — and told me that I must marry Bul-

strode, or that Bulstrode would ruin us. He had been given a week in which to decide — for me to decide; but there was little choice, for my father threatened that, if I refused to be his wife, Bulstrode would take me —” She faltered; a sob caught at her throat. “So I tried, Michael, to bring myself to marrying him, to save my father and — myself. I tried not to love you, or, rather, to quench my love — not to take yours. But now, after to-night, it is over, impossible — dearest, I give myself to you.”

“For always?”

“For always.”

“And now, Julia, you must not go back to the Manor — with these men. To-night you shall sleep at the inn, and I will watch below your window — to guard you.”

But she shook her head wistfully; her eyes were sending their glances over the silent garden, following a pale small shape which came against the deep shadows. Then the idle languor of the night was awakened by the soft, shivering hoot of an owl; again it came as the moving shape dipped downwards to the lake.

The sound seemed fell to Julia, it sent terror to her heart. She stretched forward a hand.

“Michael,” she whispered, “did you hear? Why has it come to-night? It is a warning — a warning against to-morrow.”

“To-morrow we shall be together — man and wife — with danger behind us, sunshine in our faces. What is the hoot of an owl more than a lullaby of nightingale? To-night you are fearful.”

“Yes, to-night, perhaps, I am fearful, but I fear for our happiness. Believe me, I dare not hope, dare scarcely breathe, until I tell you all — until you know. But to-night you must be ignorant; we must not even

shiver this perfect cup of happiness — these perfect minutes. To-morrow, Michael, you must meet me early — near to dawn — and now good-bye. No, I will not come with you; at the Manor I shall be safe enough, as I have always been. Believe me, I can defend myself — a woman can use a pistol sometimes as well as a man."

She rose smiling, and Michael wondered.

"I must leave you?"

"Yes, it is best. We have little time to wait; we shall be together within a few hours — at dawn; you will come? — up there on the hill where you first found me — you remember?"

"How should I forget?"

"At dawn I will meet you, show you the morning. You will be there!"

She needed assurance, courage.

"Yes, I will be there."

He got to his feet, and, taking the oval of her face between his hands, kissed her lips.

For a little they stood silent with the hush of the night around them; then, almost abruptly, Michael turned and descended into the garden. He had come to the laughing nymph, when he heard her voice calling.

"Michael, Michael!" How the words fell on the slumbering air! "Listen, to-morrow you will find me changed — you may not think that it is I who will meet you to-morrow at the edge of the woodland. But it will be your Julia. You understand?"

She heard him laugh joyfully.

"No, I do not understand — how should I? — a mortal cannot comprehend a goddess. But to me, however you may look, you will still be yourself — still adorable — still to be worshiped."

"Hush, dear . . . good-night."

A moment he looked at her as she leaned eagerly over the rose-cherished balustrade before he turned to go.

Almost hungrily Julia watched as Michael threaded the garden and crossed the sloping turf, then, as he vanished in the long shadows of the woods, she, too, turned from the terrace. Her mind was full of racing thoughts; within the minute of their parting, a strange idea had come to her, a prank of fancy. To-morrow she would meet him, not as his Julia but as Wild Will. She would shock him into knowledge; in the disguise and the sudden tearing away of it, was an easy way of telling him her secret — her great confession; far easier that than to falter out her story word by word.

At the garden door she paused; through the breathless night came the wail of the owl.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LOCKED DOOR

WHEN the melancholy call of the owl had faded, Julia, a tremor vibrating through her, turned from the garden into the vacant *salon*. Then, crossing the floor on tiptoe feet, she came, *viâ* an ante-room — a mere closet — to the foot of a narrow flight of steps; these she mounted, feeling her way by a flimsy rail as they twisted upward within the heart of the walls; for this was a secret way whose openings could be masked by doors flush with the oaken paneling — impossible to discern. So, within the flash of a minute, she was at her window, peering out just as she had done two nights since.

A great watch which lay on her table told her that it was not yet eleven o'clock, and there were many hours between now and dawn; hours of thought and inaction — a soul-weary time. And though the knowledge of Michael's protection and of his love — the knowledge that she had given herself to him, had defied her father — struck courage into her, the thought that to-morrow at daybreak she must confess all to Michael, tell him, the man she loved, that she was a common thief, a felon, without conscience, without honor, confess — for she would be entire in her abjection — that she had taken joy and pleasure in these crimes, that she had admired rather than abhorred herself for the doing of them, overwhelmed her. Oh, it was bitter, bitter!

Could he, she wondered, have compassion for her? What would he think when he saw, in that little arbor of the woodlands, not his Julia — not the woman who so lately he had crushed to his heart — but Wild Will; the rascal who had filched from him two hundred pounds, and sent a bullet through his body; and how would he act when she whipped off the mask and showed that this rascally fellow of the woods was one and the same as his goddess?

Would he come to her, take her in his arms, laugh at her fears — make earth heaven? Or would he turn with disgust and loathing of the deceit and hypocrisy — make earth hell? Tears gushed to her eyes; her hands clenched. And thus, as the minutes fled, her mind was still busy with the same thought: how would he take her as Wild Will.

To-morrow would be the last time when she would don the outer covering of the highwayman; never again must she ride out secretly into the night; never again endure the wild excitement of the gallop, the mad chase, the ride against the wind, the rain and the dawn. Never again must she know the danger, the intoxication of it all, the madness and folly, the rush, the gain, the love of a true horse exerting its energy for herself and her safety. That must be finished with; and though her soul hated what she had done, her heart longed for the doing of it — the wildness and danger and life which she had known on the road.

In a few hours she would saddle Diana for the last time; for the last time steal out into the park; for the last time mount and ride away to the hills; no — of what was she dreaming? — she would ride to meet her lover — to meet Fate — in the shadow of the near woods.

Yet why not ride to the hills? — the thought was born and breathed. Why not ride forth as of yore, not for the gain but the fascination — the pleasure and passion of it? There was time — a large margin; she could go up to the downs and there stay the throbbing of her pulses, quell the fires of doubt with the kisses of the wind. Why not? It would be the fitting, the right, termination to a *liaison* which had given pleasure and pain — with the last gallop, the final foray — booted and spurred and masked — she would break her union with the life of the road, cry “Farewell”; then, at the dawn, go to the man she loved — to confess.

With a laugh — a childish, eager laugh — she rose from the window-seat and going to the fireplace drew forth the key of the oaken chest which held all the outward signs of Wild Will.

Within five minutes she was transformed, had undergone a metamorphosis. She stood before the mirror, where the candles burned with mellow strength, in a cambric shirt, breeched, booted, winding the masses of her hair tight to the form of her head, so as to place over it the peruke and the tri-corner hat. By her lay the coat and waistcoat, the multi-caped Brunswick, the mask, the brace of pistols, all the items of her equipment — she was thorough, you see.

Then, as she paused to survey her trim figure in the mirror, as she turned this way and that, suddenly she stood rigid. Footsteps — the soft thud of heavy footsteps — echoed in the corridor, approaching slowly.

For a moment the sounds ceased, then the weight of a body against the panels of her door, and a voice — Bulstrode’s voice — called:

“Let me in!”

A quick tingling shiver ran through her, a sense of

sickness and dread for a moment made the room swing and whirl around her; then she darted to the door. It was locked, that she knew, yet the whole — panels, frame and all — was flimsy, worm-spoiled, rotten with age; it would be easy to break down, to wrench open.

“What do you want?” she asked. Her ear close to the wood she could hear his breathing.

“What do I want? What do I want — why you, d’ye understand? Ye’re mine now by right, given me — won by me, d’ye’r understand? . . . Open the door, and give me a kiss.”

A gasp came from Julia’s throat. She was seized with terror; how could she trust this man?

“Tell me what you mean.”

“Mean — mean — Zounds, ain’t I speaking English? I mean that your father’s paid a debt with you — sold you for money — four thousand.”

“Sold me!”

“Four thousand — it was two thousand an hour ago, and now, split me, it’s double; we played like devils. Your father wanted another chance — thought you were too haughty for me, and the money too good to lose; so we played again, and ye’re mine, d’ye see — so let me in. I want a sight of you.”

The slender door rattled under the throbs of his beating fists, and still she was silent. A minute passed, then she heard him again.

“Let me in, I say; can’t you understand that you’re mine — mine, body ’n’ soul? I can do what I like with you — marry you or not. You refused me as husband — now I can refuse you as my wife.”

The words came muffled through the panels; as they ended Julia drew back from the door and, though her face was pale as death, her lips formed themselves to a

smile. It was easy to escape, easy to slip from this man's clutches; the closed door which led to the empty, echoing rooms would take her to safety — that would be the gate of Liberty.

As the thought flashed into her mind she crossed quickly to the fireplace and, stooping, pushed her hand into the cavity in which were hidden her two keys — there was no time to spare. But her fingers touched bare stone; the *cachette* was empty. In vain she felt the rough surface of the bricks — with the folly of despair, knowing it impossible to find that which she sought. Then, with a little strangled cry, she drew back, stood tense, one hand at her brow pressing the curve of the temples, striving for thought. And again came the kicking and rattling of the door, fierce, quick, strong, so that the lock shook, the hinges complained.

“Let me in!” cried Bulstrode.

For a little time — no more, maybe, than a score of seconds — she stood there, thoughts racing, pulses throbbing; she knew that the key must be somewhere within the room, for no one could have taken it — no one knew of the hiding-place. Then she recollected the night of her father's visit! It had been in her hand when he had come — she must have let it fall — but where — where? The seconds flew. “How can I trust him?” she cried again in her heart.

Then, as her eyes swept hungrily around the room — seeking that little twist of metal, the key to safety — her glance — eager, searching — fell on the glistening pistol barrels. Wild Will's pistols! In a flash one was in her hand, the smooth stock pressed hard to her palm.

“Stop!” she cried.

“Open, curse you!”

“Listen!”

“Well?”

“If you break down the door, you are a dead man — I will shoot.” Her voice was firm now, her hand without a quiver.

“Ha, m'dear, what do I care for your threats — not a pinch of snuff. You may be dev'lish clever, but I'm cleverer. What would you be doing with barkers — you who are so nice that you can't open the door to your future husband; who won't seal the compact with a kiss.”

“I swear,” said she, “that I speak truth.”

“We'll see, we'll see.”

With a thud Bulstrode set a shoulder against the door, and Julia within the room knew that its flimsy panels could never stand against him — his arms and legs like battering rams, his whole body big with muscles; and, as she realised this, she stood ready, firm-footed, the pistol raised in her hand so that she could fire — straight as a hawk drops — at the level of a man's head.

And now came the terror and sickness at the thought — for one thinks in danger, without doubt even at death — of what she was on the point of doing — to kill. She turned from herself with loathing and horror, even though she realised from what the deed might save her. Her mind was a maze, her brain a labyrinth in which she sought wrong and right — for justification, for — How could she face Michael with murder on her conscience, blood, new-shed, on her hands? That would be adding the greatest shame! He would misconstrue — think that she was robbing — never forgive this — never realise. She was distraught, you see.

Her hand fell to her side; she seemed stricken, powerless to act — tied in every limb and muscle; and all the

while Bulstrode delivered fierce blows on the door, crashing with his fists on the quivering wood, thrusting with the weight of his shoulder at the panels. In a moment he would burst them; in a moment he would be before her. . . .

Her eyes as they swept around in a wild, useless gaze rested first on the keyhole of the other door and then on the down-turned pistol in her hand — her heart leaped; she had found escape!

With a sigh, a prayer, a gasp, I know not what, she was at the shut door; then, standing a yard or so from it, she raised the pistol, pointed the muzzle at the empty socket of the keyhole and snapped the trigger.

There was a sharp echoing report, a crash and a cloud of smoke and Julia, the pistol dropped, was struggling at the door; tearing aside the wreck of the lock, endeavoring to force her way through. But she did not know that, as she worked, the other door had given way easily on its hinges — that Bulstrode was stepping astride the *débris*. It was a cry from him that told her; a cry of amazement, as he beheld, not the Julia whom he had looked for, but a trim youth, wild-eyed, very flurried, struggling with a broken lock in a cloud of smoke, a reeking pistol at his feet.

But then, as she turned and he saw her face — saw that 'twas indeed Julia, he started quickly across the room towards her. A moment of agonising effort and the lock gave, with a crash and a splintering she plunged into the darkness of the room — Bulstrode near. Quickly she sped through the echoing rooms and out into the corridor, down the secret flight of stairs into the silent *salon*.

And so she went — at wind-speed — out into the gar-

den, through the strip of orchard, to Diana's stable, and there, panting, she sank to the grass.

She lay there five minutes or so — if we gauge time by a dial — then, entering the shed, she sought Diana to caress her, to flatter the smooth arch of her neck, to feel the warm softness of her nose. This did her good; her strength and courage slid back, the panic of her flight left her. Yes, left her with one supreme, dominant thought: she must go straight to Michael, to be comforted, to know his love — to confess.

So, desire-prompted, she saddled Diana and led her out into the moonlight, and then, by the drive, to the great gates of the Manor: she had no terror of Bulstrode with Diana near. She was, indeed, now almost without fear, without caution, all was forgotten in one thought — Michael. Even the fact of her manhood had lapsed from her mind, until she felt something dangling around her neck, and found the curving edges and empty sockets of her mask. As she adjusted it almost instinctively to her eyes, the thought came: "It is Wild Will's last ride; he must die soon now but, first, he must confess."

With the great gate closed behind her, she mounted again and set forward to the village, one idea only in her head — to see Michael: all thought of danger gone.

Soon, at a sharp trot, she was by the little church of Fovant-Chamberlayne — wrapped with elms and yews as in a gloomy mantle of sleep — and still her mind was busy; Michael held sway there. How she hoped, prayed, that he would take her in his arms, comfort, guard, love her. . . .

Then as she rounded a sharp bend of the road — I described it to you long since — she saw before her,

not more than a score or so of yards distant, a little posse of men in the moonlight. For a moment she was wonderstruck; then she knew! — these were the men — the excise — of whom Michael had told them; the living agents of the warrant against Wild Will — against herself!

With the quick discovery, she pulled back Diana — up high on her haunches, with a clatter of hoofs and sparks glinting from the stones. But too late — the men had seen. With a shout, a laugh, a curse, their horses lunged forward — spur-driven; in a second — or so it seemed — with no time to retreat, Julia found herself surrounded, powerless, weaponless. Then, as she searched wildly in vacant holsters, rough hands seized her. "That's 'im," "We've got 'im." "First go, by gum!" cried the men. For a fraction of time Julia was motionless, dazed, then her senses revived; she must strive for freedom.

With a grim effort she tore herself free from the hands which were on her shoulders, with clenched fist drove straight at a man's face; then, "Back, back," she hissed, and dug her heels straight into her little mare's side.

And Diana sprang forward, her sinews vibrant, her muscles taut; sprang straight at the other horses, buffeted them, drove at them, and found a way through. There were curses, the thud of falling bodies and such-like within the deep shadow of the trees — much complaining; but Julia, with a whispered word in Diana's ear, was off at a gallop. The church fell away, the cottages and then the inn flashed past — ah, how she longed to halt there! — and she was speeding down the main road of the valley. Then behind her she heard the clamor of pursuit — the clatter of ringing hoofs; but

Diana was fresh as dawn, swift as wind, Julia light in the saddle, a mistress to die for; a mistress who cooed encouragement, even as they went.

Madly they flew by the road, until the track that winds to the hills appeared, and into it Diana turned — instinct-driven — and they were to the downs, to the bare length of grassland, to a haven in one of the coombes which wrinkle the further side of the ridge.

And even as she fled, one thought rang in Julia's mind: "What does this matter? I can win the race, outdistance them all; and soon, at dawn, I shall find a way to that little space where the trees sweep round in a green circle, and there meet Michael — he will save, will guard me."

That was the thought: "He will save and guard me."

CHAPTER XXIV

VIOLENCE

AND now for a while, for the small fragment of a chapter, we must return to that villain Bulstrode, and recount briefly his further doings on that wild night and something more, too, of Mr. Vane. It is necessary for your comprehension of the tale.

Therefore I will take you, without further ado, back to Mr. Bulstrode as he stood with the acrid stench of gunpowder in his nostrils and the wreckage of two doors around him; his feet at the threshold of the unknown, his ears hearkening to the flurry of Julia's footsteps as she raced through those dark and vacant rooms.

Even his fuddled brain told him that she had escaped; that it would be useless to pursue this elusive creature — this man-girl who had hesitated to fire at him, but who had sent a bullet into the lock of a door with unerring eye — and thus darted from him. And then came the thought — the realisation of knowledge — that Julia had been dressed as a man. The fact puzzled him; what was she doing, what could the wench be about, got up like that, and with a brace of pistols, too? In truth, it was somewhat surprising.

But, at a fever-pitch of anger and disappointment, his brain refused to lead him aright; there was no sense or bottom to his reasonings — though, indeed, his were no reasonings, merely the thoughtless chronicling of impressions. So, with a curse, he turned from the

darkened room and, feeling his way along the corridor, he descended into the dim hall.

Mr. Vane was seated at the table, his head buried in his hands, his body stretched forward among the litter of cards and wine-bottles. He was stricken. To Bulstrode he appeared as he had left him; for he could not know that the old man had risen from his chair, endeavored to scream, to call, to stay Bulstrode from his love-making, to tell him that he would give him the money — yes, all — four thousand glittering guineas! But the impulse — a true impulse amidst his baseness — a flower in the pit — had been thwarted; his tongue had clung to his teeth, he had been powerless to utter a sound. He had sunk back — stricken. Then he fancied that he heard, far away, rough sounds, a crash, and the crack of a pistol, and now came the noise of footsteps and Bulstrode's voice — a voice as harsh as a raven's.

"She's gone — devil take her! — I must have the money."

"Gone!" How the word beat in the old man's brain. So this immolation, this sacrifice of his daughter — for thus, with stupendous egoism, he dubbed it — had been in vain — useless. He slowly lifted his face, haggard as a corpse's, and beheld Bulstrode standing before him.

"What do you mean, man? Money! There was Julia instead — my girl — my daughter — you can't have money. I've given her to you instead."

"And she's gone, I tell you; gone, dressed like some stable-boy!"

"Boy!"

"Zounds, can't you hear? A boy, I say; and it was the girl — I swear it. She fired a pistol through the

door — blew out the lock, and got away just as I got in. A nice game — the house is in bits — and I want the money — quick.”

A sneer worked the old man's lips, ugly to see.

“And what if I refuse, eh? What if I refuse?”

A savage look sprang to Bulstrode's features; with a laugh he came near the table, his hands stretched out before him — fingers in a curve: a sinister posture.

“I will strangle you — like that; take your thin neck in my fingers — look, they are strong — give a quick pull back, just as one does to a rabbit. 'Slife, 'tis easy done — d'ye see, old man?”

And at that Vane rose up, tottering, his eyes bulging from their sockets.

“No, no,” he cried; “no, no — I will give you what you ask.”

“As you will; hell can do without you for a little longer, no doubt.” And Bulstrode laughed again.

“But be quick, I tell you, or . . . you remember that spot of crimson on the floor — like blood, like your blood — you remember?”

“Yes, yes,” said Vane softly, as if afraid to hear his own words. “I remember . . . Yes. . . . Come, come. . . .”

With a hand shaking like a gale-blown twig, he took a candle from the table and slowly shuffled across the hall; around him the shadows whirled in a *danse macabre*, as the light swayed in his hands, now high to the ceiling, now huddled in some dark corner, where the tapestry hung rotting from the wall. Terrible, gibbering shadows he thought them. Bulstrode watched him.

With fumbling fingers he opened the door that led into the corner room — his own retreat — and entered; then, setting the candle down, he stared unseeingly

around him. For a moment he was alone, for a moment rid of the menace and terror of the other; he was trembling in every nerve, not only from fear — intense, panic fear — but with grief at the loss of his gold — the object of his miser's passion. Then he heard Bulstrode's loud drunken laugh and after that the sound of his footsteps — pad, pad — behind him; in a moment the man's face was gaping exultantly into his.

"Quick, quick, old man!" he cried.

He made an ugly rattle in his throat.

And Vane — panic-driven — with trembling limbs, moved to the further corner of the room — a dark corner; there, kneeling down, he pulled aside a corner of the carpet, and slowly — reluctantly at first, then with an almost feverish energy — he loosened and pulled up a square of the floor. The light from the candle fell on the miser's hoard.

There it lay before them, in bags — a round score, nestling safe: fat bags of leather, round stomached, tied firm at the neck, so that the gold — old Vane's life-blood — might not slip out.

"Ah!" said Bulstrode between his teeth.

But Vane was sobbing like a child, with fear and grief; his hands stretched over the hollow in the floor. A pitiable, despicable old man, evil and vile; and above him stood Bulstrode, with a smile on his lips.

"Curse you, am I to wait till dawn? Hand 'em up." He spoke roughly, and touched the other with his heavy foot.

With a groan, Vane bent down and seized six of the bags — four large ones and two small — in his quavering fingers; then, clutching them to his body, he rocked himself backward and forward, muttering, crooning to the gold.

A minute, maybe, Bulstrode watched him, a look of contempt at his lips; then stooping down he seized the bags from the old man's embrace and stowed them in his pockets.

"That's my due," he cried; "now I want more — yes, more. All you've got, and, by Heaven, I'll have it!"

For a moment it seemed that Vane was dazed, struck dumb and paralysed by the words, then a fierce light crept to his eyes, his teeth shut grimly beneath the weak lips. With a spring he was on his feet, had hurled his frail weight against Bulstrode, clutching, clawing, like a wild beast — fighting with his nails, his teeth showing hungrily, his breath gasping from his throat, his old eyes aflame.

Momentarily Bulstrode was powerless with amazement and horror, then anger and loathing swept over him in a torrent. He lifted his arm, his hand still grasping one of the gold-bags and, leaning back so far as he was able, he struck hard with it at the old man's temples, at the wrinkles and knotted veins — full with all his might at the curve of the skull.

"Take that!" he hissed.

With a groan the miser's grip relaxed, his teeth unclosed from Bulstrode's coat, the eyelids dropped over the eager eyes, his head jerked back, and he fell in a heap — like a bundle of fagots — on the boards, his hands beating the air, his fingers clutching.

For a fraction — a matter, perhaps, of a dozen heartbeats — Bulstrode stood motionless, then, with a sound half-laugh, half-groan — drunken, delirious — he stooped, caught the money-bags from their hiding-place and clutching them in his arms, fled from the room, out

to the hall and, tearing open the great door, he rushed wildly to the stable where stood his horse.

And all the while — even when he was astride his heavy roan, and was far from the park, riding as if from hell — he imagined that old Vane was behind him in the shadows, peering at his shoulder, pale as wax, with blood trickling from his forehead.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CALL IN THE NIGHT

SIR MICHAEL — for it is to him that we must now turn — on leaving Julia in the garden, had wandered slowly to the inn; all his pulses were throbbing with delight, and he was walking, as they say, on air.

But once back at the “Fovant Arms” and snugly in bed, like many another of young Cupid’s victims, he was seized with a restlessness of mind and body; sleep deserted him. His ears hearkened to the sounds that came from the inn parlor and the kicking of impatient horses in their stalls. These were unwonted noises, but Pierre had explained the bustle.

It seemed that the excise officers, of whom Bulstrode had spoken at dinner, were now (after a long day of fruitless search and investigation for Wild Will) halted at the “Fovant Arms” to refresh themselves before pushing on to Dinton for the night. They had arrived at nine or thereabouts and now, an hour or so after, were still very much at their ease. It was doubtful, hazarded Pierre, if they would set out before midnight.

At length, however, Sir Michael, a-bed upstairs, heard the men leading out the horses; shouts, laughs, snatches of song followed — and they were gone. Next his ears caught the sounds of their retreat in the distance, as they took the road to Dinton and — peace. The night was still.

Five minutes passed, silently, regularly — one could almost hear the world breathing; then came the sharp clatter of a horse galloping — loud — louder — louder — finally dying in diminuendo; and after it, almost on the spot, the thunder of five or six sets of hoofs battering along at the same rate. After that — again peace.

For Sir Michael, after this wild transit, sleep was impossible, his brain was busy, his thoughts racing fast; so he lay with his eyes fixed at the blue-gray square of the window, through the open space of which he could see caught, it seemed, in the tree-tops, the glistening eye of an immeasurably distant star.

A half-hour of peace, calm, silence passed, then, again, he heard the throb and thud of racing hoofs, thundering on the road past the inn and the muffled voice of a man — the words unintelligible — urging the beast to quicker speed.

Truly it was a night of action, thought Sir Michael, as he turned somewhat wearily to his side, and, vaguely wondering if his robber — this Wild Will fellow — would be netted, his puzzled senses lost themselves in sleep.

It must have been well towards two o'clock of that morning — for the moon had sunk — when Sir Michael was again aroused from a complete slumber — no negligible state this time — by a loud rattling at the inn door, to be followed by a succession of strange, unearthly sounds.

They awakened him with somewhat of a start, his thoughts flying instantly — like a cloud of swallows to the south — to Julia — Julia alone at the Manor with Bulstrode and her father. He seemed, indeed, to know by instinct that the summons in the night meant danger for her; therefore, as the knocking grew louder, he

sprang from the bed and moved to the window. Leaning out into the night, he called:

"Who's there? — what do you want? What has happened?"

But the reply to his queries, thrown from the rose-framed window, was only a repetition of the sounds — quite blood-freezing, I assure you — and further beatings on the door. So Sir Michael, after another abortive effort to make himself heard, began swiftly to tumble into his clothes.

Within five minutes after his leap from bed, he was descending the staircase of the inn, fully dressed. At the foot he met the landlord; a fussy fellow — at the present moment wrapped in a seedy dressing-gown; on his head sat a nightcap boasting a bobbling tassel, and in his hand was a lighted candle, from which the tallow dripped.

At sight of Sir Michael he drew back and tried, vainly, to efface himself in shadow; it seemed that he was far from proud of his appearance.

"Yer pardon, zur," he apologised, "but oi'm about seeing whoam ther' be at the door. A prutty night, what with them 'sise-men and now this rattling, when good folks should be a-bed."

And without further ado — he had settled already, that it was useless attempting to hide his bulk — he bustled down the narrow passage. At the doorway the stout innkeeper — Mr. Chubb, his name — halted, set down his candle on a bracket, unbarred the bolts, turned the key and thrust open, rather cautiously, the heavy door.

A weird object was before them.

A little old woman frail and wrinkled was there, her face thrust forward under a shawl from which escaped

strands of gray hair; her eyes staring from black depths, her mumbling mouth sending out those strange sounds — primitive and grotesque — which, along with her knocking, had aroused Sir Michael and Mr. Chubb. One hand was clutched at her meagre throat, the other — old, knotted, with the thin flesh sagging between the bones — stretching out before her as if, even as the panels of the door fell back, she was still knocking; unknowing that they were opening, heedless of the scrape and grating of bolts and bars.

For a moment the two in the passage were silent before the apparition, then the innkeeper, purple in the cheeks and with a gasp in his throat, coughed out:

“Dang me, if it b'ain't old Jane, the deaf un' up t' Manor.”

A moment Sir Michael looked, then realised that, in sober truth, it was indeed the old servant who, only a few hours before, had been with Julia in the hall, around the supper-table — old Jane, the mute! And now she was come to awaken them, to bring some news, some message; who, even as they stood there, beckoned, and pointed a withered hand toward the road that lead to the Manor. There must be danger. Sir Michael was alert.

“Something must be wrong,” he cried; “we must go to the Manor at once. Quickly, too, or perhaps we shall arrive late.”

For a moment Mr. Chubb stared blankly, then he nodded, and muttering some strange expletives, denoting, no doubt, surprise, prepared to shuffle off. He was already on the way to arouse the rest of the house, collect helpers, dress himself — anything — when again came the sound of horses's hoofs approaching the inn. A minute of waiting passed, and a posse of men rode up;

five they were, each astride horses dripping with sweat, foam-flecked to their eyes; the men looking as if they had been long in the saddle, riding hard.

They drew up with a clatter and their leader — a somewhat fierce-faced fellow, heavy-made, with, perhaps, forty years to his credit — dismounted, and, holding his mare by the reins, came up to the door.

“Lord strike me,” said he, “but give me a drink; we’ve had the devil’s own game.”

And at that, his mercenary instincts overbearing all else, Mr. Chubb ambled off, candle and all, to his tap-room. No amount of news, of gossip, or events could keep him from an honest deal!

At his departure, Michael stepped forward from the dark.

“What’s up? Something at the Manor it seems. This woman — a servant of Mr. Vane’s — has just roused us and seems to need help. Things are not as they should be —”

A lantern had by now been kindled, and with its raised light they all fixed eyes on old Jane. It was an arresting tableau: the men leaning forward over the necks of their steaming horses, there at the inn door; the transparent darkness of a June night all around them and the woman in the midst, dim seen in the glow, with a scraggy finger pointing down the road, gibbering like an ape. To Michael she appeared a dread figure.

It was the leader who broke silence. “It’s more than likely that there’s summat wrong at the Manor,” said he. “I and my men have been hunting Wild Will these two hours; he rode straight at us by the church, a quarter of a mile from the Manor gates, riding like — Heaven knows what.”

Here was news!

"Wild Will! You are sure?"

"Sure's they call me Dick Holden — we saw his mask. There he was, a nice young chap, riding as pretty a mare as you'd see 'twixt May and Michaelmas fair."

This was enough for Sir Michael; they must act!

"Then it's straight to the Manor — do you understand? Very well, you and your men can have a drink first — at my expense — and perhaps, Mr. Holden, you will permit me to have one of your men's horses? It will save time, and I am anxious — I have particular interests at the Manor."

"Yes, sir," said Holden, and turned to greet Mr. Chubb and his beer-jugs. Man is very human.

A trifle impatiently Sir Michael edged his way through the fast-filling passage — the landlord's wife in a flowered bed-robe, the waiting-wench, a groom, were all hovering near now — and up to his room. There he discovered Pierre fully dressed, and as imperturbable as if welcoming his master home after the play. Quickly Sir Michael, conversing in snatches, in questions without answers, collected a cloak, his sword and a couple of pistols, and, having thus completed his toilette, he again descended the narrow stairs.

At the door he found the men finishing their ale — drinking with gusto and smacking their lips at the exercise; old Jane standing alone in the porch, shivering and sobbing.

Michael strode out: there must be no further delay.

"Mr. Holden, are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Then let's away."

There was a minute during which mugs were drunk to the dregs, girths tightened, and then they set off. He seemed to have taken the command almost uncon-

sciously, as men of greater ability and greater purpose of character do when danger is afoot. To this Mr. Holden, with the rest, silently agreed.

As they rode off Michael noticed that the first flash of dawn, the first gleam of its spear, was quivering behind the hills; the stars were fading like dying flowers, and the world was pulsing forward into light. A moment his thoughts were with the dawn, then again, in a rush, the agony of his mind overwhelmed him. What was to greet them at the Manor? And thus, even as the torturing sword of uncertainty seemed to plunge deeper into his heart, the little group of horsemen wheeled through the parted gates of the Manor, between the grinning creatures on their pillars, and down the moss-muffled drive.

Before the main doorway of the great silent house — easy to be seen in the quickening light — they drew in their reins and dismounted. Then, two of the men having been left without on the gravel-sweep to hold the horses, they passed through the open door — Sir Michael, Holden and two others. A strange, stifling air met them; the reek of wine and tobacco and another clammy breath, bewildering in the June dawn.

Within the darkness of the hall they were able for the moment, to see nothing, for only a faint glow crept through the painted windows; then, as one of the men thrust forward a lanthorn, light swam forward into the gloom and, sketched in gold and shadows, they beheld the disorder of the room — the littered table, the wine-bottles, cards and broken glass, an upset chair; but nothing human, nothing breathing.

“Zounds,” said Holden, “we should have brought the old hag.”

"On your crupper, Bill," said one of the men to his fellow, and laughed.

Michael moved forward.

"There is no one here," said he tonelessly.

Leading the way, the lanthorn-bearer at his heels, he walked the hall to the open door of the library; he had noticed the room on the previous evening.

They had crossed half of the flooring, flashing the yellow glow hither and thither, when they saw — the four searchers — tumbled on the floor, crumpled half in, half out of a cavity in the boards, the body of the old miser.

"It is Mr. Vane," said Sir Michael calmly. He seemed to walk in a dream, to speak words which were thrust into his mouth — not his own words. His acts were unconscious, he moved and thought and spoke mechanically.

The men drew nearer, and, in the lanthorn's light, examined the body, the hardening thread of blood which had oozed from the temples, the clutching fingers stiff in death, the horrid look of the fixed eyes, the ugly gape of the lower jaw. It was Holden who spoke.

"God help him! Wild Will has done his worst there,
. . . Now for the lady — come, men."

But here again Sir Michael was before them; taking the lanthorn from the men's grasp, he turned and ran from the room, across the vacant hall and up the stairs. A terror was numbing his heart, tearing, biting. Where was Julia, what might have happened — he dared not think.

"Julia," he called hoarsely, and again, "Julia, Julia."

But his cries rang answerless; there was no sign of

the woman he sought. In vain he searched in the gloomy passages, the dim alcoves, in bare, tenantless apartments; at length he came to the battered door of Julia's room. Swiftly he stepped over the fallen *débris* and, as the light flashed forward, he seemed for a moment a thing of stone — without heart-beat, bloodless, paralysed.

A sickness, a giddiness seized him, played with his thoughts; vaguely he saw the scene of the room, the shattered wood-work of the doors, an overturned table and, there on the floor, the fallen pistol. What did it mean? Who had desecrated the shrine? Had she defended herself? Whither was she gone?

His mind, his thoughts, turned mistily to grapple with his impressions, to clutch at facts. He must follow her — find her — seek —”

The lanthorn crashed from his hand; he sank to the floor in a swoon.

CHAPTER XXVI

AT TRUSCOTT FARM

SIR MICHAEL awoke from his swoon — brought on, they said afterward, by stress and excitement, added to his still pretty considerable weakness — to find himself stretched on a table in the Manor hall, Pierre at his side. Somehow, things recalled the regaining of consciousness after his affair with Wild Will. He underwent the same sensations of falling, of instability, of darkness and blinding light.

He lay, indeed, some while in this condition; vague and wandering as an errant soul on the banks of Styx; then, under the influence of a glass of brandy — mixed sparingly with water — set between his teeth, and water coming in a cool kiss to his forehead, his senses rushed back — he was himself. A minute, and he was sitting bolt upright on the table, his hand clutching Pierre's arm.

"Tell me," said he, "the hour. How long have I been — like this?"

Pierre — a stolid sort of fellow, who viewed his master's vagaries rather with amused toleration, even pity, than approbation — answered composedly:

"The church clock, sir, has struck five; you have been unconscious, more or less, *comme on dit*, one half an hour."

"It is dawn? The sun is up?"

"Yes, sir, the sun is long up."

Sir Michael's hand sank to his side; a sigh, deep-drawn, escaped from his lips, a weary look came to his features. He was too late to meet Julia — soon after dawn they had said; the hour was past. And then came the maddening, griping thought — had she been there? What danger had taken her? No, he saw little chance that Julia had been at their trysting-place in the woodland; something had imperilled her, something had — He could not think — his mind was chaos.

Pierre brought back his fleeing thoughts.

"I followed, sir, with Jane the servant, sir, to the Manor. Here Monsieur Holden and his men were searching for you. At last we you found — *nous vous avons trouvé* — upstairs. We carried you here —"

"And Holden — the men? "

"They search the park."

By, now Sir Michael had slid from the table to the floor; his gaze wandering around. Then his eyes fell on the closed doorway of the library; with a shiver he turned to the gaping portal of the great door; without there was sunlight and sweet air.

"Come," said he to Pierre, "I am well rested. We will leave this place to its own ghosts, with Holden and his men to watch them."

And without further word he crossed the hall and strode out into the sunlight. His energy was returned, his head clear to think and his body ripe for action.

Once back at the "Fovant Arms," he walked straight to the garden-seat in the orchard — he would have none of Pierre — and there, under the green of the apple-leaves and the elusive turquoise of the sky, he set himself to find an answer to the problems,

He reviewed slowly, minutely, the episodes and the sequence of things of the previous night; everything, from his meeting with Julia beside the lake, up to his parting with her on the terrace. He saw again each detail and action of that scene in the hall: the duel challenge, Bulstrode's cowardice, old Vane — all — all; and still he was no nearer to the secret of the mystery.

He had left the Manor, so far as he might judge, at ten o'clock, left Julia on the highest terrace of the garden, the others in the hall — that was fixed. Then, next in the row of happenings, Mr. Holden, and his posse had met Wild Will — about midnight — riding full-tilt from the Manor gates, and they had given chase — vainly. They had ridden three — nigh four — hours in pursuit, and were returned to the inn at dawn; at the Manor they had found the old miser stretched dead over his rifled hoard, and Julia's room a wreck — an emptiness.

Thus Sir Michael reviewed the facts. But dull facts they remained: they seemed to stand before his eyes like unlit lamps waiting illumination. It was he who last had seen the two actors of the night's drama — tragedy, if you will — it was he that had beheld the results of that tragedy; it was he who held most dear one of the actors of the mystery — and he was powerless to unravel it.

Suppose, ran his thoughts, that Wild Will had entered the Manor in order to rape the miser's hoard — of which gossip swore Mr. Vane was possessed; suppose, indeed, that he had captured it, where then was Julia? How came she into the tangle? Let it be granted that Vane had been murdered as he defended his money-bags, how came Wild Will — if it were he — to have fought his way into Julia's room? Surely there was some other

thing than robbery at the bottom of that — some further mystery, too.

Then came a new thought: where had Bulstrode been during the fierce drama? What part had he played? And again, why had he not raised the alarm if he had been at the Manor? If! — there was no doubt of it. Sir Michael recalled his impressions of the night: the first single horseman to be followed, heel after heel, by the clattering rush of Holden and his men, and then, some while after, the rush of another galloping horseman — “Bulstrode, by Heaven, Bulstrode!” cried Michael.

That was it; there had been two villains of the midnight tragedy — the robber and the lover; Wild Will and Bulstrode; there was the key to the mystery, ready to hand. When Bulstrode, drink maddened, had staggered upstairs and was battering at Julia’s door, the highwayman — the creature from the night — had entered, robbed and murdered old Vane. And Julia? With a sickening of heart Michael realised that perhaps Bulstrode had overpowered her, taken her — that even now she might be at his mercy.

Things seemed clear now; clear enough, at all events, to act upon. That half hour of meditation, deduction, piecing together of evidence — call it what you will — had not been time wasted; he was sure now as to what must be his next move—it was Bulstrode who knew more than the rest. To Bulstrode he would go — he would play a lone hand. The excisemen could follow Wild Will if they wished—but for him there was other quarry.

By seven o’clock Sir Michael, astride his horse, was mounting the green sweep of the downs on his way to Truscott Farm in the valley of Chalke,

His mind, as you may fancy, was still busy with its problem, but, with each beat of his horse's hoofs, he was coming nearer to the truth. He was beginning to suspect that Bulstrode was the root and seat of it all, that the presence of Wild Will had been an amazing coincidence — that some odd chance had set him on that road at the crucial moment of the night's drama. Roughly his reasonings ran thus: — Julia had told him that her father had lost much money to Bulstrode; what more probable than that he should refuse to discharge his debt; that Bulstrode had threatened — compelled Vane to disclose the secret, treasured hoard — and then, when the old miser in a paroxysm of rage had defied Bulstrode, had come the tragedy? And next, maddened with wine and blood-drunken, insane — might he not have sought Julia, and by force entered her room; taken her with him? Julia had told him of Bulstrode's passion.

Michael shuddered. It was not a pleasant termination to which his sequence of ideas had brought him — sharp work when the ball of suspicion was once set a-rolling; indeed the world, his world, seemed darkened by gloomy veils, the bliss of the morning snatched away. How different would the sun have shone if in the young hours of the day they had met, he and his Julia, in the little haven of the hills, and there had she lisped to him her dread confession — a confession at which he would snap his fingers.

So, with these thoughts in his mind, Sir Michael rode fast — almost recklessly — by the track which sweeps over the broad back of the downs, into the Vale of Chalke; there, with some questioning of yokels and of a farmer — jolly-faced and stout, in the midst of a turnip-field — he found his way to Bulstrode's abode — Trus-

cott. The place stood midway between a brace of villages, and was set back some way from the road under the shelter of the hills. It seemed decent and comfortable enough, and of a more than modest size — an old gray affair, clustered around with a battalion of soaring elms.

As Sir Michael rode up, across the field which separated the house from the road and the willow-hung stream, the sounds of his approach were greeted by the impatient clamorings of dogs, deep and shrill, piercing and tremulous. Mr. Bulstrode kept a kennel, it seemed. Arrived at the gravel-sweep before the door, he dismounted and pealed the bell; as he waited for response his eyes wandered around, surveying — a smile, almost supercilious, on his lips — the demesne of this yeoman squire, this rake of the fields, this follower of fox-hounds, shooter of partridges, drinker of much liquor; this fellow who, with a few boon companions, was held in the Vale of Chalke — and far beyond — as the greatest rip in Wiltshire — the terror of good Christians, the horror of parsons and the hero — O frail mortality! — of more than one.

And here was Julia — at his mercy! Sir Michael was aflame with anxiety.

“Oh, it’s you, Sir Soft-Liver,” said a voice, bluff and impudent. At the words Michael turned and found himself face to face with Mr. Bulstrode. That gentleman stood below him on the gravel; his legs thrust apart, a whip in his hand, with the crook set above his hipbone — a black spaniel skulking at his heels. “So you’ve come to visit me — I’m honored.”

Though he spoke with assurance, with an attempt even at good-humor, Michael perceived — indeed it was pretty obvious — that Bulstrode was not in as sweet

a temper with himself and the world as he customarily was. His face was splotched with red as if its paleness were blotted with wine; his mouth hung loose and his eyes looked — even as he blustered — furtively from side to side. He was obviously a man afraid.

“Yes, I have come to see you.”

“Ah! Will you walk in? It’s deucedly hot this morning; a tramp round a couple of fields has made me sweat like a hunter after an hour’s run. Phew!”

Bulstrode, dabbing his forehead, came forward; the dog trailed at his heels.

“You can hitch your mount here,” continued he. “A good horse — let me congratulate you.”

Then, taking the bridle from Sir Michael’s hand, he led the horse aside and hitched the leather, with a certain adroitness, to a ring set in a crevice of the gray wall. He was back at the door and about to push it open when the spaniel, still at his heels, brushed against its master’s legs.

In an instant Bulstrode’s expression changed; from the cowardice — palpable beneath the layer of braggadoccio — it became a mask of rage and fury. For a moment he glared down at the cringing beast, then, seizing the stock of his whip, he brought down the lash, thick and knotted, on its back.

“Curse you,” he cried, “I’ll teach you to trip me up; I’ll —”

His eyes, as he raised them, looked full at Sir Michael’s; with an indrawn breath he stopped, for a moment faced him in silence as the dog ran whimpering away, then turned to the house.

They entered singly, and once within the hall Bulstrode led the way to a room set on the left.

It was a comfortable enough place, furnished with a

set of solid chairs, a table, and a massive piece of oak — half sideboard, half dresser. The floor was covered with a good carpet, now somewhat worn; the windows boasted heavy velvet curtains; on the walls were sporting prints, while over the mantelpiece hung crossed whips and a fox's mask.

"You will have something, Sir Michael, eh?"

Bulstrode spoke from near the sideboard; in his hand he held a bottle of brandy and a glass.

"Thank you; I have little time to spare." Michael spoke coldly even in the heat of his anger, the boil of his anxiety. The man sickened him, revolted him — he was sheer evil from crown to sole. As each minute passed Michael grew more and more assured that Bulstrode knew much — if not all — concerning the nocturnal events of the Manor; the man seemed, indeed, changed beyond recognition. He had done something of violence between light and light; each movement, each gesture, as he tossed down his throat the glass of brandy, made Michael become more sure. Of Julia he dared not think.

With a slight sound — a mere grating — Bulstrode set down the bottle, then, crossing the floor, he spoke.

"And now, Sir Michael, I should be obliged to hear the reason of your visit."

For a moment they faced each other in silence; fought a battle of eye-glances, then:

"I have come — I regret that I should trouble you — in order to discuss certain doings at Fovant Manor last night. I have reason to believe that you are able to explain them."

"I? . . . What doings?"

His lips were twitching.

"You are ignorant of them?"

"As a mole."

Sir Michael shrugged.

"May I then state a few facts? . . . I have your permission? Good. . . . You will remember, then, that I left you and Mr. Vane — after a painful interview — in the hall of the Manor — the hour, ten o'clock or thereabouts — when it was, I believe, your intention to play at cards or dice — I was originally to join with you. As I have said, I quitted the Manor an hour or two before midnight; now I ask you to tell me what occurred between that time and dawn."

"Your right to question?"

"I confess — none. My reason for questioning — my suspicions."

"Suspicions!" Bulstrode gave a laugh, hoarse, false. "Of what do you suspect me?"

For a second Michael paused, uncertain; but quickly he determined.

"Of the capture, by force, of Mistress Julia Vane, and the murder of her father."

The truth — or rather Sir Michael's guessing at it — was out; by a sentence he had torn aside all the veil which concealed his thoughts; within five minutes of his arrival he had told tersely — almost brutally — his suspicions; without diplomacy, almost without reflection, driven by uncertainty.

For a little Bulstrode stood silent; it seemed as if the whole purport of the accusation had not reached him, as if he could not realise that so soon his crime was discovered. Then came a word, a single repetition:

"Murder!"

"Murder."

A pause, and Bulstrode dropped backward to a chair, his hand stretching before him as if to defend himself. His face was ghastly, his lips quivering.

"Prove it," he gasped.

"There is the proof." Michael pointed straight at him, a queer look on his face, scorn, anger, contempt.

"You are the proof — you have betrayed yourself."

With an effort Bulstrode rose from the chair, rose and came to Michael; then standing before him:

"You lie, you lie," he cried. "I swear, by Heaven, I know nothing of old Vane, nothing of your Julia, nothing of her and her lovers —"

"Take care, take care." Michael's voice was sharp — like flint striking against flint. "Repeat those words, and I kill you now, with no question of fight, no duel. You have one chance: take me to Mistress Vane and if she is unharmed, untouched, then — you are safe; if not, you can pray to me in vain. Do you understand? Take me to her."

"Take you to her!" Bulstrode started. "Do you think she's here?"

"Perhaps — you should know."

"You think that I know many things, it seems — devilish odd things." Bulstrode was regaining his courage now; a dash of color had come back to his cheeks; a thought, a vital thought for him, had struggled to his mind. "What do you know of what happened at the Manor?"

"The truth."

"Tell it then — what you know."

"If you wish."

Michael fronted him calmly.

"Yes, yes."

From the garden without, through the open window, came the breath and scent of hayfields, the soft caress of a breeze, and the sounds — far away — of life; the lilt of a lark, the burr and boom of bees, the song of a reaper. Sir Michael listened; then he spoke.

“Mr. Bulstrode, I will be brief; indeed, I have little to tell you. . . . It seems that, after I had quitted the Manor, you played at cards with Mr. Vane and won heavily. The hours went, you played higher and higher; at last you ceased and demanded payment of your debt — you were refused. You threatened, and finally compelled Mr. Vane to show you the store of gold — his miser’s wealth — which gossip said that he possessed. In some way — my knowledge is faulty there, I confess — you quarrelled; in an excess of rage — drunken, savage — you killed him; of set purpose or by chance, I know not. There is the first part of the story. Do you deny it? . . . From that moment you were without reason, or judgment, your passions alight, ablaze; you seized the money and, fleeing from the corpse, sought for Mistress Julia, by violence entered her room. . . . I demand that you tell me of her.”

As Michael finished speaking the last word of his strange indictment, Bulstrode turned abruptly and walked to the window. There he paused. His brows were knotted, a queer look sat on his features; though scarcely realising it, he fought for his life and freedom. At Michael’s entrance, at the sound and meaning of his first words, he had been panic-seized, stricken; a gulf had opened, yawning, at his feet. In his own words, he was “done.” Then had come that flashing thought, which seemed the frail foundation of a bridge to span the

abyss; and slowly, gradually, as Michael spoke, conviction came to him; he realised that on that foundation might be built his own road to safety.

For a while, a matter of minutes, he stood before the window, the glare of sunlight in his eyes, the scent of hay at his nostrils, his thoughts at a gallop. Then he turned abruptly on his heel, determined.

"Mistress Julia is here," said he.

Michael breathed hard; he was within an ace of doing mischief. He spoke sharply between his teeth.

"Take me to her," said he again.

"I have conditions." Thus Bulstrode doggedly.

"You consider yourself in a position to dictate them?"

"I have, at least, the advantage of you. I am in my own house, my servants are at call. You are weaponless — a sword does not count against firearms. Remember you've left your barkers in the saddle-holsters. You agree?"

"Yes, I admit your advantage. . . . Your condition?"

For a moment Bulstrode stood silent; he laughed harshly.

"That," said he, "I'll tell you presently. Come and find the wench; your pardon — Mistress Julia Vane. I swear to you that she has received no harm from me, either in this house or elsewhere."

He finished with a blink of the eyes, then beckoning with his finger he led the way from the room.

Michael followed: his hand was on the pommel of his sword, alert.

With heavy footsteps Bulstrode mounted a narrow flight of stairs, Michael at his heels. The house though poorly kept, appeared solid and of certain pretensions,

a venerable manor farm built by some well-to-do person in the stormy times of the early Tudor kings; a place which had an air almost of fortification — or rather narrow windows and the massive girth of the walls gave one that impression.

Arrived at the finish of the lower flight of stairs, Bulstrode turned down a passage, and then again began to mount. At its foot Sir Michael paused, his eyes noting the inward slope of the roof, the aged beams, the garlands of cobwebs; grime and dust clung everywhere, to his nostrils the air seemed tainted. Suddenly he paused, hesitating; suppose some trap was laid, suppose that he was blindly walking into it — suppose? Then surged back his thoughts of Julia; impatience, the passion to behold her and to listen to the murmur of her voice, overwhelmed all. With no more thought, he sprang up the creaking stairs; at their head he found Bulstrode standing before a door, a bunch of keys in his hand.

"She's here," said he gruffly; "not too comfortable, I allow, but safely out of the way; I am secret, you see — cunning as any fox."

He had by now fitted the key to the lock; it turned gratingly and Bulstrode stood back. In the darkness Michael could not see how he trembled.

"There's the prison, enter — the jailor's done his job. You can take the jade!"

Bulstrode stood back, and Sir Michael, impatient, throbbing with love, moved forward to the door. For a moment he paused, fumbling at the handle, and in that instant Bulstrode, with all his strength, pushed fiercely at Michael's back. With a groan and a rain of dust the door gave and Michael fell forward into the room, hands and knees on the floor.

Light faced him, blinding after the darkness; for a little he crouched there, motionless with the surprise and shock of it, then, as his eyes told him that the room was empty, he heard the slam of the door — the complaint of a turning key, and Bulstrode's laugh echoing through the massive panels.

He was a prisoner — duped!

CHAPTER XXVII

THE USES OF A RODENT

SIR MICHAEL, already on his feet when Bulstrode's laugh ended, sprang to the door and called loudly, imperiously; then he began, feverishly, to hammer with his fists upon the woodwork, to strain at the latch and handle — madly and in vain. No answer came to his shouts, he heard only the sound of heavy footsteps descending the stairs. And beneath his onslaught the stout timber scarcely quivered, the lock and the bolt held firm as vices; the whole door bulged but a fraction — escape, through it, was out of the question.

With despair and mortification wrenching at his heart he turned to survey the room. It was a minute affair, nothing more, indeed, than an attic wedged between the sloping flanks of a gable. At the further end, directly opposite to the door, set high from the flooring, was a small window — a mere vent-hole — which admitted a golden oblong of sunlight; but at first glance he could see that egress by it was impossible, for the opening was little more than a foot square and crossed with an iron bar, while both the bar and the glass pane were set firmly into the plaster.

On either side the wall rose straight, paneled, as seemed the entire house, with musty oak; while, above, the roof leaned over it to form a pointed vault, criss-crossed with beams and rafters. For the rest, with the

exception of a narrow bench, the place was barren of furniture, boasting nothing but dust and a fantastic lace-work of cobwebs. Obviously there was no method by which to escape from this dreary cage of wood and plaster; impossible even to ascertain at what height or at which corner of the house it was situated; impossible to locate oneself, for from the *œil de bœuf* of a window he could barely see the highest crests of the elm-trees which clustered near the farm. He was fairly trapped.

It was with a little gasp of something near to horror that Sir Michael, after a survey of this roof-chamber, sank down on the bench, realisation of his plight his poignant companion. For himself he did not so much care; indeed, at any other time, he would, very possibly, have smiled at this ridiculous trapping, this bare-faced ruse to which he had fallen victim; but now, since his departure from London, the whole key of his life had been changed — the musician, I scarcely need tell you, was Julia. Therefore, closeted in this miserable attic, the thought that maddened and overwhelmed him was that she — the splendid She — might still, for all he knew, be in Bulstrode's power, at his mercy. Nothing could reassure him; go through all the possibilities, the chances, the likelihoods, as he might, there was nothing to convince him to the contrary.

For if she were not a prisoner, as he imagined, would not she have come to their trysting-place at dawn, and finding it bare of the man she sought have returned straightway to the Manor — *she* could have no fear of the law or its representatives. Might she not even have fled straight to him at the inn? Yet, perhaps, she had thought that he had played truant from the *rendez-vous* by will; that he had twisted in his opinions. Oh, the bitterness of it! as bitter, in a measure, as the thought

that she was here, beneath the same roof — a nymph in the clutches of a satyr — and he powerless.

Anon, in his idleness, the notion seized him that it might be possible to attract attention by shouting from that slit of a window. It was a chance, and a frail one at that, for it seemed probable that Bulstrode's servants, under their master's instructions, would pay no more heed to the cries of the prisoner — even if they heard them — than to the wail of peewits on autumn evenings, or the peal of owls. But it was a chance, however remote; so, drawing his rapier, he plunged its sharp point through the misty glass; then, as the splinters trickled to the floor, he grasped the narrow sill and pulling himself level with the glass-fringed opening, shouted at the full force of his lungs. But even as he hung there the strip of wood broke under his grasp and he dropped back a foot or so to the floor, and, call as he might from thence, the useless sounds went echoing up into the narrow vault, falling backward within.

With a sigh of despair at his failure, Sir Michael returned to tampering with the door, examining its firm hinges, plying again at the resolute lock, bumping on the unyielding panels, but always in vain. He was forced to return to his narrow seat, dejected; tax his brain as he might, he could see no way of quitting his dust-coated cell, of breaking from the prison. It seemed as if he must wait, with straining patience, until released. How he cursed his folly for trusting in Bulstrode even for a second — the quiver of an eyelid.

But now the day had worn on; noon was past and hunger was working within him; hunger and thirst, for this retreat, straight beneath the sun-scorched tiles, was hot as an oven, and little air filtered through the fractured window. The stillness was intense, nothing

seemed alive, nothing broke the silence but the scurrying — very rare — of mice behind the paneling and, without, the caw of a sailing rook. Only once came a heavier sound behind the oak; the lop-lop of a rat's clumsy body, Michael decided. Lop, lop, lop — very loud; lop, lop — softer; lop, lop, lop — still more soft; in diminuendo, as if the beast were jumping down a flight of stairs. "Strange!" thought Sir Michael. "Surely the stairs are too far distant for the tread of a solitary rodent to be distinguishable." Thus for a moment he idly wondered, then all thought of it vanished; his mind was busy with other things — seething with anxiety for Julia.

And so, gradually, with leaden feet, the hours lapsed; the oblong of sunlight was squashed and flattened into all manner of odd shapes — rhomboids, squares, hexagons, parallelograms — as it was caught and broken by the rafters of the roof; then briefly it intensified, reddened, and snuffed out in a little gush of crimson. The sky faded, the glow became faint green deepening into blue, and then, after many hours it seemed to Sir Michael, one star gleamed forth. Next, soon after the advent of the star, Sir Michael, who long since had stretched himself on the floor with his cloak as a pillow, fell into sleep. He was worn out, aweary from hunger and stress of mind.

He awoke to find the moon's face staring in at him and the place full of the sound of scurrying feet: rats again. The sound which he had heard before — lop, lop, lop — as if the creatures were springing from one step to another; but now it sounded closer, at his head. With a movement of impatience he turned and rapped on the panels to scare the little beasts from their gambols — the noise worked on his nerves. But when he

had rapped he drew up, sitting, his blood tingling. The panel had rung hollow as a bell!

With feverish haste he ran his fingers over the woodwork, endeavoring to discover if, through it, lay a way of escape; was it not possible that in this year-worn house — built in troublous days — there lurked some secret chamber, some priest's hole? And here, maybe, was the entrance to it. But nothing save the plain woodwork responded to his touch; there seemed to be no irregularity, no crack or crevice; feel as he might in the darkness his fingers could find nothing, no spring, no concealed mechanism. Yet, assuredly, this panel was hollow, a mere mask, different — he had tested them swiftly — from the rest. How could it be?

It was after a while of pondering on the phenomenon and when Sir Michael was again beating with his knuckles against the wainscot, that surprising success came to him. A small knot of wood — three inches or so in diameter — gave way beneath his touch on a rusty, though well-made hinge. In an instant Sir Michael had poked his finger — his right index — through the small eye of the aperture, and it was encountering the cold rim of a latch. Then, raising the latch, he pressed hard with his knee a trifle below the magic wood-knot. With a groaning and prolonged creakings the panel fell away and disclosed a dim aperture, faintly moonlit; there was just sufficient light to make visible the outline of descending steps. Here, it seemed, was more than he could have hoped for. Here lay, it appeared, not only a hiding-place — a priest's hole — but the head of a secret stairway — surely it must lead him to safety? He would hazard it at all events.

In less time than I can tell it, he had risen to his feet, seized his cloak and rapier, and, having squeezed

through the opening, begun with cautious feet to descend the stair. Four steps and, somewhat to his surprise, he was at the bottom of the flight, standing in a narrow passage with, a yard to his right, a tall slit of a window set oddly in an angle. Eagerly he peered through the dim glass, but disappointment lay beyond; he beheld only the sloping shoulders of gables, fringed with eaves, and a small, level place ending in a parapet. There seemed little prospect of escape thence. He turned wearily away, moved forward cautiously a few feet in the darkness, and was brought to a pause by the bulk of a door — iron-bound. But an instant's examination of its stability and invulnerableness, the firm grip of the lock, convinced him that it was as impassable as the door of his prison.

A momentary faintness gripped him; weak with anxiety and the want of food, his mind too tempest-tossed with thoughts of Julia he leaned back against the cold thickness of the wall, heart-sick with disappointment.

Then, as he stood there, his head sunk forward, his hands crossed on the pommel of his sword — like a knight at vigil — the glimmering of moonlight through the window became to him a frail beacon of hope. How could he know that there might not be some way of escape even in that wilderness of gables?

With new hope — rising Phoenix-wise from the ashes of the old — he moved down the passage and pushed at the rusted hasp of the window. After a minute of noisy complainings it opened wearily, and Sir Michael was through the narrow aperture — no easy task — and out beneath the stars. He stood on a small platform, a bare six feet in width and perhaps a trifle over that amount in length; on either side rose the tiled screens of gables — behind him, too — with the window

from which he had just emerged set oddly in the acute angle. Above spread the sweep of heaven; before him was a black vacancy of trees. How might one find here the road of escape?

With a careful, though fruitless, survey of the little airy terrace — its gables, you must know, boasted no foothold, and were built at a completely unclimbable angle — Sir Michael walked to the parapet and peered over. Below him, and at an uncomfortable distance, he perceived the sweep of a lawn, close guarded by trees — trees dark as thunder-clouds with lightnings of moonlight. Was escape to be found here — true escape — or only the inevitable escape of every prisoner — death? He drew back quickly.

Below not a sound or the glimmer of a lamp told of life; no yellow beams gushed from a window to gild the great growth of ivy that wrapped the side of the house — the north-looking and moonless façade — like a funeral mantle.

He had stood there, by the parapet, some minutes — vainly peering around, his mind thronging with wild schemes — when his eyes, attuned now to the dimness, caught the dull gray line of a rope rising from the dark waves of ivy. Then, kneeling and craning over the low parapet, he discovered that in the angle made by the jutting gable, or rather in the niche beneath its shadow, the rope was fastened with wonderful security to an iron ring set directly under the gable — well concealed. What was this? something of vital interest, Sir Michael considered; for ropes do not dangle reasonlessly from roofs. With excitement thrilling him he grasped the descending thread — it was metal-bound — and pulled with all his force. It was firm as a balustrade.

First, the decision done — he unbuckled his sword,

and driving the blade well home in the scabbard, wrapped it tightly in his cloak and cast it over the parapet. What a deal of time it took to fall! The thud for a moment wrought on his mind, made him pause, too, as he lifted one leg over the fretted parapet, then, as the echo died, he leaned forward to the pendent rope. A moment and he was hanging, as it seemed, in mid-air, the wheeling stars above him, below him the black night, his feet seeking for foothold among the stone-embracing ivy.

Then began the descent, the perilous descent, into the depths; feeling for foothold, grasping the rust-clogged rope that plunged through the serpentine branches of the creeper, and thus he worked downward, giddily, dangerously; ten — fifteen — twenty feet, the edge of the roof high above him etched against the sky.

He had done, perhaps, one-half of his journey, when, suddenly, he found himself within an ace of falling head-long into the abyss below, for the rope terminated abruptly in a frayed stump. He saved himself, in the nick of time, by grabbing at a thick ivy stem.

At first he imagined that he could continue his descent by aid of the tenacious creeper, but, after an examination — a somewhat difficult feat — of the wall below him, he discovered with amaze that the roots had grown sparsely, and the main "trunk" of the growth sprang from the ground somewhat to his left. It would, therefore, be necessary to scramble sideways — like an aerial crab — and then make a descent with the aid of the matted leaves, or else, having sidled to the window — the frame of which he could see six feet or so in the same direction — effect an entrance there — forcibly.

Still undecided on which course were the better, with infinite care he quitted his hold of the rope, by clutch-

ing the creeper, and with his hands advancing leftward; another movement and he was before the window, his feet set against the wall, one hand gripping an ivy trail, the other the central mullion of the window — the pane, you must know, was open. He was hanging thus, for a moment, actionless and wondering what should be his next move, when his ears caught sounds from behind the thick curtain which masked the window. Footsteps followed — a heavy tread — then, in an instant, the curtain was plucked aside and a light flashed into his face.

“Good God, it’s you!”

Bulstrode spoke; his face a yard from Sir Michael’s. For a moment they stared at each other eye to eye, one within the window, dimly seen, with the soft glow of candles behind him, the other — Sir Michael — pendant without — a strange tableau! A moment, I say, they fronted one another thus; then, suddenly, Bulstrode lunged forward, with his fist at Sir Michael’s breast; once, and again, with good following blows, Sir Michael’s fingers slipped from the sill at the onslaught, and, with one hand only to uphold him, he felt that he was leaning further and further back into the black gulf, under the pressure of Bulstrode’s knuckles and the force of blows which he was powerless to defend. Then, at the crux of the struggle, came the sound of a tearing and a cracking, and a great fan-shaped mass of ivy — curved like a peacock’s tail — tore itself from the wall and bent over groundwards — Sir Michael at the end of it, hanging by one hand.

Nearer, nearer, it drooped toward the ground; he could see below him — ten feet or so — the velvet pall of the lawn and above Bulstrode, baffled, at the window. Nearer, nearer — a wrenching crack — and Sir Michael landed with comparative gentleness on the dewy grass,

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE YEW WOOD

IT appeared that Bulstrode scarce looked to see the result of his fierce lunges at Sir Michael; perhaps he imagined that he had killed him, and that was not his purpose — one corpse is burden enough on a man's conscience; but of that I know nothing. At any rate, when Sir Michael had picked himself out of the leafy *débris*, had found his cloak and rapier, and was proceeding around the corner of the house, he heard before him the thunder of galloping hoofs — retreating. Sir Michael lived to the tune of them, it seemed.

Arrived at the sweep of the drive, he found a couple of servants, one bearing a lanthorn. They were peering forward into the moonlight, following with their eyes the silhouette of the fleeing horseman. At Michael's appearance — I confess that it was a somewhat apparition-like entry — they seemed surprised.

"Is your master gone?" he asked.

"As if John Ketch were arter him," remarked one. There was a silence, then: "And who, sir, may you be, begging your pardon?"

Sir Michael smiled; it was a question a little awkward to answer with any certitude. He decided on an off-hand take-me-as-you-find-me attitude.

"I am the gentleman who came to see your master yesterday morning — you probably have my nag in the stable now. I should be obliged for him."

In spite of obviously jingled coins, the explanation seemed scarcely sufficient. The men looked sullen.

"And where, sir, be you come from now?" demanded one."

"From Mr. Bulstrode's room — by the window." Sir Michael laughed.

Then, viewing their looks of incredulity, suspicion, and the swift change to curiosity, it struck him that it would be best to humor them.

"Look here, my men, we'll strike a bargain. If you will tell me what I want to know, I will tell you what *you* want to know. And another: if you will give me something to eat and saddle my horse, I will give you something to put in your pockets. Do you agree?"

For two minutes — a full hundred and twenty seconds — the men discussed the matter in low tones, weighed pros and cons, hesitated, guffawed once till the lanthorn shook. Finally the spokesman — the other seemed mum as an image — came forward and stretched out a hand.

Sir Michael took it solemnly.

"Agreed, sir, and thank you. . . . And now, I daresay we can find ourselves summat to eat; but, quietly, sir, quietly, I beg. The cook-maid is abed, and there must be no rousing of her. She's danged careful of the victuals."

And turning to the front door — these two bucolic retainers of Truscott Farm — the spokesman pushed it open and led the way into the parlor to which Bulstrode had conducted Sir Michael for their fatal interview. Here they found candles, guttering from being left unsnuffed, lighting a cloth-spread table on which was set the plenteous remains of a meal.

"Now, sir," said the Lucifer, setting his lanthorn down.

His meaning was a little cryptic, but Sir Michael, seeing a look in his face of expectation, spoke:

"You have agreed to my bargain; very good. Confidence against confidence; meat and a saddled horse against guineas."

"Against guineas, eh?"

"Guineas."

"Yes, I allow that we agree."

They had arrived thus far when the pair of servants — they seemed no respecters of persons — plumped themselves down on a couple of chairs, and Sir Michael, with humor in his eye, followed their example. It was he who spoke.

"To begin with," said he, "I wish to know at what hour Mr. Bulstrode arrived here last night."

"I heard him at two o'clock."

To Michael's surprise, it was the silent one of the domestic pair who spoke — the groom; a thin fellow, undersized, bow-legged.

"And did he come alone?"

"'Lone?"

"He did not bring Mistress Julia Vane with him?"

"No (it was still the groom — a glass of brandy had unsealed his tongue), there was no lady, no female. He had nothin' but a bundle in his arms — a heavyish bundle, though small. It chinked, too, sir, chink, chink, chink, like money. You may depend on me, sir, that there was no female, not but what sometimes —"

Sir Michael intervened; he had no wish to hear of Bulstrode's amours. But a weight was lifted from his heart, a veil seemed to have fallen from his eyes. Julia was not here! The nymph had escaped the satyr.

"You are sure about the lady? Very well, then, now for my other question. Where has your master gone?"

"That we don't know — leastways, no particulars. He only said that he was a-goin' away — gave a main lot of orders, and took a deal of money."

It was still the pallid groom who spoke — brandy worked miracles with him.

A pause followed, in which Sir Michael pondered on the advisability of asking more questions, of risking the chance of rousing suspicion by a too pertinent inquisitiveness. He had called all the facts of which he was vitally in need, was reassured, metamorphosed almost, by these few odd words; he deemed it useless to ask farther. It was time for his confidence; he was anxious, too, for some of the cold, roast chicken which lay before him on the table.

He poured himself out a glass of wine, and then turned to his odd companions.

"Believe me," said he, "much obliged for what you have informed me. Now I shall be pleased to tell you something — not too much, for I am time-pressed — of myself. I made the acquaintance of Mr. Bulstrode at Fovant Manor — you know the house? — where I met him a mere couple of times; yesterday, having an important matter to discuss with him, I rode over here. He found me on the doorstep and brought me to this room. For a time we spoke, discussed, argued — I repeat it was an urgent matter — and then, on the pretext of showing me something which I was immoderately anxious to see, he led me to the top of the house, and there — you may scarce credit me — managed by a trap, into which I was fool enough to fall, to shut me in an attic. . . . You show surprise; I don't wonder — I have

been surprised myself ever since ten o'clock yesterday morning. It is not pleasant to be made a prisoner like that. An hour ago, however, I managed — the luck was with me then — to discover that this attic was an ante-room to a secret passage which led by a window to the roof. From thence I came to the ground with the aid of a dangling rope and the tangle of ivy."

He paused a moment to let the full value of his odd story sink into the fellows' heads; then, with a laugh:

"And now, when I have supped, I am ready for my horse and you doubtless will be itching for my guineas — two apiece."

Yes, there had been a horse — he was in the stables. Lord, to think of it — a prisoner! Had one ever heard such a thing? It was something surprising — even for the master! Hungry? — Lord, yes!

So ran the men's tongues while Sir Michael demolished half a chicken and a plate of ham; and so they continued to run when the pair left Sir Michael and sought for the stables. Gold shone before their eyes.

I will pass over briefly the next hour of Sir Michael's adventure; suffice it that the men saddled his horse and brought him to the door and, after a few parting words and the transmission of guineas, Michael rode off on the way for Fovant-Chamberlayne. Of his thoughts, neither, will I tell you much, for you must know, without enlightenment, how that he was chafing at the fact that his visit to Truscott Farm was barren as regarded information concerning Julia; had been, in fact, merely productive of twenty hours of delay. Even the fact that Bulstrode had returned from the Manor money-laden told him nothing definite of the murder; he was entirely without proof of his suspicions against Bul-

strode. As to the cause of Julia's disappearance he was still fumbling in darkness; no nearer the dawn. He could only pray that he would find her returned — his to claim.

So thus, his thoughts galloping with the hoofs of his horse, he breasted the hills and came down to the village through the morning mists; soon he was rapping at the door of the "Fovant Arms."

It was Pierre who opened to him, a pale, sleep-wanting Pierre, who cried with joy at his master's appearance. The fellow was at the door — about to descend the couple of steps and take his master's horse — when his eyes caught the white glint of a letter lying on the threshold. Across it was written: "To Sir Michael Stanton — for his hand alone."

Pierre stooped and picked it up.

"Here is this for you, sir," said he, and turned to the horse — he was of Spartan imperturbability.

But Michael was otherwise; he seized the letter, tore it open, and began to read quickly.

It ran thus:

DEAR MICHAEL,— I am in great danger — it is impossible for me to return to the Manor. Come, I beg you, to the wood called Great Yews — early; alone too. Come quickly.

JULIA.

Twice, thrice, he read the letter — the precise, fearful words — then he turned abruptly to Pierre.

"Tell me what has happened since yesterday? Quick — there is life and death here!"

And Pierre told him — shortly. All yesterday the country had been seething with excitement, pricked with anger against Wild Will for this new crime. Everyone,

it seemed, had gone a-searching, reinforcements of the excise, together with groups and posses of all sorts, were scouring the country around. As yet nothing was definite, only here and there were vague rumours of Wild Will's appearance. He was like the Brocken spectre — as intangible and awesome. The letter? No one knew of it — it must have been left during the night. And Sir Michael, where had he been? Pierre was inquisitive. But to his questioning his master remained taciturn; he was in haste — he had few minutes to spare.

Within little time Sir Michael was again in the saddle — off to obey the summons of the letter; his horse refreshed by a pint of wine with his oats, they were ready to go far together; gold, too, was in his pockets, primed pistols in his holsters. So, thus prepared, he rode swift and hard again up the slope of the downs — opal now with morning light. Up above the mist-hung valley, alone with the sun, the air, the sweet wind — spurting onward.

And now mark, if you are willing, the contrast between Sir Michael when first I introduced him to you and Sir Michael as he is now. Three weeks or so back he was a world-weary, gilded young man, dangling, one might say, around Mademoiselle Clothilde; and now, behold, the passionate, deep-souled lover, alive with ardor and anxiety — pricking forward to his lady, with danger before him flourishing her red flag. It was a genuine life — his old one a mere sham, artificial to its core.

Again I will give you no detail of the ride, for our puppets have been much in the saddle, and, indeed, will scarce be out of it, scarce draw rein, till the close. Only will I say that he descended from the great white whip-lash of the Shaftesbury road to the snug village

of Coombe — contented of look, with a placid duck-pond and a decent church — and there, having enquired the way to Great Yews, set off again up the further brim of the valley. He rode now, however, with a new sensation of excitement, for the yokel whom he had questioned had told him, with grins and chucklings, that three of the excisemen had galloped through Coombe not long since in chase of a man, cloaked and well mounted — Wild Will without a doubt. Of their destination the bumpkin knew nothing.

Up at the summit of the hill a dazzling view swept out before Sir Michael's eyes, a view of gorse-sprinkled downs and of far-away, miraculously blue woods. Everything seemed new with life, dew-washed, pungent with the summer perfume of the dædal earth.

For a moment he drew rein to sniff at the bouquet of the morning, to set his eyes on the wonder of form and color; then, turning his horse, he put him to a canter. He could see his destination now: a great green-black blot of trees. There, pray Heaven, would he find Julia; there would she tell him what danger they had to face — tell him all. Oh, the riddle of it!

He came nearer, the trees disentangled themselves; low hawthorns showed between the gloomy yews, bramble and eglantine twisted everywhere, gorse sent up golden flames. He came to the spot where the bridle-path touched the hem of the wood, then drew rein, and called thrice:

“Julia! Julia! Julia!”

Silence answered him; he seemed alone, desolate, as if panting in a desert. A minute passed, and Sir Michael caught the sound of footsteps. Someone was approaching, someone was parting the clinging honeysuckle.

His heart beat quicker. Surprise, amazement seized

him, for a man, a youthful man, cloaked in green, stood before him, a mask across his features. It was Wild Will! The letter had meant betrayal — so ran his thoughts.

Already his hand was on the stock of his pistol, alert to defend himself, when the figure ran forward straight towards him. Then Wild Will raised his hand, the mask fell away, and Julia's eyes met his.

“O Michael, Michael, forgive me! it is I — your Julia,” she cried, and, sobbing, she sank on the flower-strewn grass.



THEN WILD WILL RAISED HIS HAND, THE MASK FELL AWAY,
AND JULIA'S EYES MET HIS.

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CHAPTER XXIX

CONFESSION

SHE sank, I say, sobbing, panting with humiliation, with fear — almost with terror. She knew that now the die was cast, the die of her fate, her life — all her happiness. How would he meet her words, how answer her? It seemed eternity as she crouched there — her face buried in her crossed arms, her arms resting on the bend of her knee — waiting for words of forgiveness or the thunder of rebuke. She realised at that moment, more than she had ever done before, the full dread of confession — the keenness of the penalty which she had to pay.

And then came the answer. She knew that he was bending over her, felt the touch of hands tender as a mother's, heard a voice — very gentle.

“Julia, Julia — little woman — little wife.”

Her head was drawn back, her cheeks were in the cup of his hands and, quivering, she opened her eyes to his. In a moment their lips were together.

It was within the grave shadow of the wood, when they were seated under one of the dusky yews — their horses hitched to a tree — that Sir Michael questioned. Then he said:

“Now, if you will, tell me all — all from end to end.”

But even with the precious knowledge of forgiveness, it was hard to speak, hard to begin. To Julia the facts of her life, the sordid tale, the catalogue of her doings,

the whole story of Wild Will, appeared monstrous — unforgivable. She spoke with an effort, with difficulty — her words, her sentences, were little like those which she had prepared.

“It goes back far,” she faltered; “it began long ago — the seeds of it were sown in the old days when my father and I were in London; they were watered, I think, in Paris — indeed all my life, all my surroundings, everything was the beginning of this — my infamy.”

But Michael interrupted, smiling.

“Let us leave that to other days. Now I want facts; just the plain facts concerning the birth and life of Wild Will. I don’t — I can’t — understand.”

“You are right, we have no time to spare; there are many things to decide, to plan. I will try and tell you shortly, simply, with no endeavor to excuse or to lessen my guilt — there is no excuse. . . . I will leave the past and come to nearer days. You know that we have lived several years at the Manor now; you know, too, of our seclusion, our isolation, our complete separation from the world. I speak truth when I say that no one visited us at the Manor for four years, until Mr. Bulstrode became friendly with my father. He came rarely at first, then more often; at length I realised that he came to see me — that he wished to marry me. Soon my father spoke of it. I refused; he was furious, threatened, swore — in vain. I was obdurate. Then began weary months, months of misery, when often — no, I must be brief; there is no time to tell all which happened then. You know already my father’s greed of gold; it was to satisfy this greed that I was to marry Bulstrode for he was to receive from him on the wedding day two thousand pounds. It was the thought of this — or the knowledge that the money was

slipping from him which prompted the idea of Wild Will. And I — knowing the alternative, ignorant of the real crime of it — accepted. . . . I did little at first; small expeditions on which I robbed a farmer or two on his way back from market — then the madness seized me. I was wild, delirious with the joy and thrill of it; I became braver, more daring; I waylaid private carriages, chaises — once the coach between Salisbury and Shaston. My feats became notorious — I became Wild Will. My plunder increased; it was necessary to journey to London to turn my store of jewelry and valuables into gold; twice within the year I went quickly to London, a month ago I went again and — you were there.”

She had spoken quickly, at racing pace; her thoughts had come pell-mell and she had given voice to them clumsily; but his love had read for him between the lines, painted for him the roughly sketched picture.

“You remember that meeting in the shop? I was selling jewels and watches — an odd medley of trinkets. I returned, as you know, to Fovant-Chamberlayne two days after, taking with me two hundred and sixty pounds — the sum which I had received for the things. But my father was not satisfied; he was positive that I had received more, that I had hidden a portion from him; he swore that Bulstrode should marry me unless I gave him the money . . . and so, distracted, I thought of you, you and the money which you carried. I fell to the temptation — Oh, the shame! — the horror of it!”

Michael intervened.

“The bravery — the daring of it! But why — why did you just not come and ask me for it as woman in place of man, as the sweetest woman of the world

in place of a bold belligerent, who held a pistol to my heart, snatched my money, and put a bullet —”

A cry came from Julia.

“No, no; spare me that! Believe me, that thought has burnt my heart day and night; that bullet wounded me more cruelly, I think, than it wounded you. O Michael, it is only right that you should blame me, turn away from me; it is right, it is just.”

But he, instead, drew her towards him, took her in his arms, kissed her lips.

“Hush,” he said. “Let us laugh instead of weep. Brave cavaliers, dashing gentlemen of the road should not be distraught when a pellet finds its mark. . . . I only sigh that this terrible confession did not come sooner; imagine the misery it would have saved, had I but let you tell!”

“I was to have met you yesterday in our woodland haven, within the shelter of the hazels, and now — now I have led you into new danger.”

“Danger?” Michael spoke with surprise, for only then did he begin to realise that, in sober truth, there was danger to be faced. It was difficult to believe that all this was anything more serious than some capricious play; almost impossible to credit that this frail girl was limb and limb, eye and eye, soul and soul to this desperado whom all the countryside was a-seeking; against whose work all Wilts was in hue and cry — that seemed not believable! Rather was it as if some child had played at highwayman in all simplicity — as if it were something that a child might be lightly punished for. Sir Michael found it hard to comprehend that Julia was in danger of law, of sentence of death — and yet ’twas pretty clear. Wild Will had done many a crime upon the highway, Wild Will had a price upon

his head, the halter was in readiness to encircle the neck of that head; Wild Will was Julia — ergo! —

Sir Michael had exclaimed the word “danger” on the impulse of the moment, with something near to surprise, but a minute of tumbling thought had shown him that it was real, imminent. He turned quickly, a furrow between his brows.

“Tell me, dear heart, how you are come here? How until now you have escaped?”

“You remember when, two nights ago — how far away it seems! — we parted on the terrace, that my father and Bulstrode were left together in the hall; for a little I waited in the moonlight, then, going to my room, I sat idly by the window, thinking, wondering. At length came the idea that once again — for the last time of my life — I should be Wild Will; I imagined that so disguised it would be easier for me to confess to you; there would be no explanation before the truth should come out, you would ‘know’ — as you knew just now — in a flash. I wanted, too, one more ride; for the last time I longed to feel the freedom of manhood, the exhilaration, the joy of liberty — all, indeed, that I held most precious in my — trade. Then, when I had dressed and was ready to set out — first to the hills and after to meet you — Bulstrode came.”

“What did he want?”

“There had been a quarrel over cards. My father had lost more money and refused to pay. Then, when they had agreed that I should be given in payment of the debt, Bulstrode came to my room. He told me that I was to be his wife, cried that he wished to see me. But I was fearful — I dared not trust him. . . . I thought that I had been safe, for there are two doors which lead from my room; but I was mis-

taken — the other door was locked and I had lost the key. I was forced to turn to my pistols; but after the meeting with you I knew that never again could I shoot at a man — not even at a man such as Bulstrode. Instead I blew out the lock of one door just as Bulstrode had wrenched away the frail panels of the other — so I escaped."

"He saw you?"

"Yes; I am sure of it."

Michael moved. It was strange that nothing had been said during their interview of Julia masquerading as a man — there would have been a jeer in that.

"From Bulstrode I escaped; running, I went to the little shed in which my mare was always kept — yes, Michael, you have much to be told — saddled her, mounted, and rode swiftly from the Manor; it seemed haunted. Chance was against me, for I rode straight into a group of excisemen — barely escaped — and, for three hours, I was pursued, tracked, hunted like an animal. But at dawn I had found a way back to our meeting-place. It was empty, the park full of — enemies. There is my story."

She laughed freely, girlishly; laughed with merry eyes fixed on Michael's grave face. He was a sober lover.

"And since then?" he questioned.

"I have wandered over the hills, through the woodland — pursued!"

"You have starved!"

"No," she answered, and flushed; the glow had faded from her eyes. "At a lonely farm I surprised an old woman — remember this is my last adventure — and at the end of a pistol, made her give me food and the means of writing that letter which I left on the door-

step of the 'Arms'; that letter which, thank God, has brought you to me. . . . Ah, Michael, forgive me, forgive me! If you could tell how I have suffered since I knew that you loved me — suffered to think that I could never be worthy of you — forgive, forgive!"

He answered with a kiss. Then for a while they stayed silent. Only from without the wood came the lazy voices of birds, the glad, shimmering song of the lark, the drone of bumble-bees — honey-seeking.

Of all they said there in the shelter of the trees I will say little, for the most that was to tell you know already, and their lovers' talk is not for us. Enough that Sir Michael told Julia of all that had happened to him, from the hour when he had been called from the inn by old Jane up to his escape from Truscott Farm — to his finding of her; enough that Michael now held the key of the mystery, knew that Bulstrode was the murderer.

An hour passed, an hour of whispering, of talk, which glided by as a handful of minutes, then Michael turned to her with words of question.

"And now, dear heart, what of to-day — what of to-morrow?"

She was looking before her into the wall of greenery.

"There is danger," said she again.

"Yes, there is danger."

"And now that I have you, that you are here, I fear danger — death — more than I have ever feared before. Now that you 'know' and still are mine I want my life, and there is little safety — little chance of it. By now the tale of Wild Will breaking into that farm will be abroad — all the country will be ablaze."

"We must return to the Manor secretly; there you

must again become Mistress Julia — Wild Will shall be dead.”

She shook her head.

“How is that possible? The Manor will be guarded; how can we ride there after two days? No, no, that would be folly — madness; there is but one plan, one way for safety.”

“And that?”

“Flight.”

“Flight!” Michael was amazed; it was still hard to unravel this tangle, to see things as they rightly stood.

“You have forgotten,” said Julia very softly. “Bulstrode knows, and his knowledge seals our lips; one word from him, one word of suspicion against me — my armor of secrecy would crumble. . . . Michael, will you guard me, go with me?”

His look was answer enough.

All through the ardor of the midsummer day they sheltered in the woodland, happy even in their extremity; playing, even as they planned, that danger was a dream, death a mere form of words; that they themselves and their love were the only real things of life; playing that when dusk was fallen they would ride forth into the tender June night as a knight and his lady setting out to see the great world — peacefully, in infinite happiness.

But in their hearts they knew that their journey would lead them to the coast, to the full brim of the ocean; that they must seek safety beyond the stubborn cliffs of England; that they stood within the grim shadow of the gallows — that their world was dark with it.

CHAPTER XXX

FLIGHT

WITH evening came a soft, bustling wind, springing from nowhere, that fanned the trees to murmuring life. Clouds, too, rolled from the west — colorless, hazy clouds at first, which darkened, with the fall of hours, to masses of dove-gray.

All through the day, in spite of lack of food, in spite, too, of thirst almost piteous, Sir Michael and Julia had stayed within the shelter of the yews, only rarely peering from between the green boughs. Once, when looking, they had seen galloping horsemen not half a mile from where they hid.

It was near to seven o'clock when Sir Michael decided that they should set out for the coast. Possibly they would have been wiser had they remained within their sylvan harborage till darkness had fallen; but set against the further safety of that course were many things — the difficulty of finding their way over the hills by night, the faintness of Julia from want of food which — dissemble as she might — was plain to be seen; the necessity for Julia to obtain woman's clothes within a few hours; for the death of that desperado Wild Will must now be speedy.

When they led their horse into the open and mounted, dusk was falling, gray and windy, belieing almost grimly the promise of the morning. The earth appeared menacing; Nature frowned.

For a moderately wide radius around Fovant-Chamberlayne Julia knew the countryside as well as the Manor park, while on the ridge between Salisbury and Shaston every tree and shrub, every swell and dip of the land she could recognise. But beyond this definite radius Hampshire and Dorset stretched vague to her as a land untraveled, unexplored; yet she was pretty sure of leading Sir Michael rightly to the valley of the Avon — to Fordingbridge. She knew, at any rate, the outline of the country; the formation, the direction of things, if not each track and path.

For a while they rode on the smooth bosom of the downs, gray-green and austere now beneath the summer scowl of the sky; lonely, too, and desolate. It seemed a world of cloudy distance, of quick wind and gathering night. They went for the most part in silence, side by side, weary and hunger-torn; yet their thoughts even then, I think, dwelt on the sweetness of the day rather than on the bitterness of it. They had ridden thus, perhaps, a couple of miles, when, suddenly, at the foot of a gradual hill which they had been descending, they came upon a rough track leading from the downs into the windings of a narrow valley. A moment of thought, and Julia had decided; this would lead to Whichbury — a modest village crowding at the foot of the church-crowded hill — and thence to Fordingbridge. They must take it.

Twenty minutes of hard trotting and they were passing through the short street of Whichbury. Men and women, standing at their cottage doors, surveyed them carelessly at first, then with interest; many stared fully, others whispered between themselves.

“Let us hurry,” whispered Julia, and they pricked forward more swiftly.

They had left behind them the little group of houses with their peering inhabitants and were passing near a small cottage, set solitary by the wayside, when Michael, as they rode, saw Julia sway slightly in the saddle, saw her clutch wildly before her. In a moment she fell back swooning into his arms — for they had been riding close, and he had leaned forward as she swayed. Thus — he supporting her — they came to the door of the cottage, where having dismounted — not without difficulty — he lifted her tenderly from the saddle and carried her to the doorway; then, still holding her in the circle of his arms, he rapped on the panel of the half-open door. The movement awakened her to consciousness.

“Michael,” she whispered, “why are we staying here?”

“For food, for water; it is necessary.”

The rattle of Sir Michael’s knuckles on the wood brought a woman to the door, a tall, vixenish creature, raw-boned and lank; she eyed the pair suspiciously.

“What be you wanting with me?” she demanded roughly.

Michael swept off his hat.

“My young friend here,” said he — how barely he escaped calling her “this young lady”! — “is overcome with fatigue, having ridden far without food. I ask you for water, for bread, and for —”

“And who may you be, begging honest folks for food?”

“Pardon me. There is no question of begging — I have money with which to pay.”

“And how do I know that it’s honest got? Maybe ye be like this Wildy Will that folks is all a-talking of — maybe ye’re him yerself.”

Spoken at random, the woman did not know how her words shot home — in truth, they shot deep. It was something of a shock that the news, the hue and cry, should have gone so far; danger was dogging them, it seemed. Sir Michael found it difficult to force a smile, as he replied:

“No, I can assure you that I am not Wild Will; I am merely a traveler who has taken the wrong turning — I am for Fordingbridge — much in need of food and, as I have said, ready to pay for it.”

The woman for a moment eyed them keenly; then her stern features relaxed a trifle.

“Well, maybe, if you set the other gentleman on the bank — he looks ready for a rest — I’ll get you a mug of water and some bread and cheese — that’s all I’ve got. But I can’t a-let you come in; you see my man’s away — I couldn’t do it alone.”

“I am much obliged,” said Sir Michael, “but we have little time. I wish to reach Fordingbridge before night-fall, to prevent missing the road again.”

Then, leading Julia to the roadside, he wrapped her snug in his cloak and turned to the horses. The woman had stalked back into the cottage and to them as they waited, hearts panting with anxiety, it seemed a brief eternity before she returned, bearing mugs of water — ice-cold from a well — bread, and a lump of yellow cheese. They took the food greedily, and a strange smile flickered around the woman’s stern lips as they ate and drank of the simple provisions; she did not realise that to them — well-nigh famished — the cheese-covered bread was welcome as ambrosia, the crystal water better than Olympian nectar; yet it seemed to call back Julia to new life, to set the blood flowing quick

through her veins ; a color came back to her pale cheeks, light to her eyes.

The rough meal was nearly done, when Michael leaned forward and whispered to her :

“ Julia, we must be speeding ; the chase has come even here. There is no time to lose, I fancy.”

And to his warning, the gravity of his words, she answered with a smile and a whispered word of encouragement. There was no tremor of fear in her eyes, no quivering of her limbs ; instead, she rose smiling, to her feet.

“ I am ready,” said she.

It was when Sir Michael had thrust a crown into the woman’s eager fingers and they were about to mount that to his ears came sounds which sent fear to his heart. He heard the echo of horses’ hoofs coming down the shallow valley, carried on the back of the rising wind. Praying that Julia would miss them — for they came tentatively, now loud, now vanishing — he sprang to the saddle and together they set off on the road which the woman told them led to Fordingbridge.

They had gone, perhaps, for ten minutes at a useful trot when Julia reined in her mare and turned her ear to the wind.

“ I cannot hear them now,” said she ; “ perhaps they stayed at the cottage.”

And thus, as she sent her horse forward with a word, Michael realised that she, too, knew of the following horsemen.

They decided, as they rode, that it would be wiser, for the moment, to travel at a comparatively easy pace, for Heaven knew to what extremities they might not be pushed ; to what speeds, what ruses, they might not

be driven before daylight broke; and, though they could again hear the hoof-beats of the following horses, there was no imminent danger of their being overtaken.

Soon they were down on the level floor of the valley, and near them shone the lights of Fordingbridge. Which road should they take? Before them to the east stretched the unknown borderland of the forest; southward the way led by Ringwood, to the sea; northward it curled back to Salisbury. Together as they rode — fast now, so that there might be no chance of being overtaken in Fordingbridge — they conned over, discussed in short sentences — thrown, as it were, from saddle to saddle — the risks and chances of every route. But it was something nearer to Fate than to the fruit of their own thoughts which had the deciding of it, for they were beyond the hem of the little town before their plans were clear. In the narrow, close-wedged street many were abroad, many turned curious eyes to them — something, perhaps, in their look, or the speed of their horses drew attention — and a score of eyes were on them as they asked the way to Salisbury — for they had some idea of a “double.”

A man pointed out the road, and Sir Michael thanked him with a word; but as they continued down the winding street, he called softly to Julia: “Turn rightward,” and, in a minute, they had bridged the river on which Fordingbridge is set and were again out in the dim green of the country, bearing southward.

As they left the town behind them — the venerable church and the smatter of houses standing up whitely from the meadows — darkness was creeping diligently from the east; the sun had faded, long since, in a mass of smoky, wind-driven cloud; night was with them, both

to aid and to hinder; a night dark and noisy with swaying branches and rustling leaves. It would be hard, Michael thought, to hear the sound of the following horsemen if still they were pursued.

For near an hour they pushed forward, scarcely speaking, without drawing rein, yet without pushing speed — without a prick of the spur. The lights of Ringwood were close before them when they drew to a halt at side of the road, within the shadow of a copse. Michael leaned forward.

“Dearest,” said he, “you are weary — death-weary.”

“Perhaps — a little,” she answered. “But with you, what does it matter? — with you —”

For a moment her lips seemed to dwell lovingly on the words; then she laughed softly.

“Come, comrade,” she cried; “we must go onward — onward —”

“To the sea — to safety — freedom!”

At his words a tremor ran through her, a soft vibration, as a flower vibrates to the wind.

“You fear? Why? — tell me. Together we will find some harborage in the sweet south; together, you and I, you — my dear wife.”

So they spoke briefly, strengthening each other with words and tones, as only lovers can; Michael leaning towards her, dimly seen, her face as a small, pale moon in the heavy gloom.

Then something drove them apart: sounds — quick — sudden — the persistent drumming of hoofs — near, very near. A cry came, falteringly, from Julia’s lips.

“It is they,” she whispered, “close — close. Come Michael, we must ride — fast.”

And with a word they were off, going hard, reins

loose. Danger was near for Sir Michael had seen, by a quick look, a dark group on the road behind them, a quarter of a mile, perhaps, away.

Soon — in a flash it seemed — they were in the streets of Ringwood, dazzled by lights, bewildered with turnings and twistings of the way; yet even here they dared not to draw rein, dared not slacken speed for behind them, almost within pistol-shot, came the following sleuth-hounds tracking their prey. And so, with their horses' hoofs clattering on the cobbles — beating like drums — they passed galloping — swift as a vision — through the town; too swift to be realised, too swift to be stayed or spoken to, leaving behind them a street of bemazed folk — of opening windows, of indignant, amused, shocked, bewildered townfolk. And as the excisemen came into the hubbub on their sweating horses — came and were frowned upon by the excited populace, by the parson and the mayor — Michael and Julia were again out on the flowing ribbon of the road, galloping onward. They had gained half a score of minutes by that mad rush through Ringwood.

And then, for long, they pushed forward into the night, pausing ever and again and always to hear behind them the clamor and thunder of their pursuers, now nearer, now farther — now farther. It seemed, that they gained — there was heartsomeness in that! Before them pointed the line of the road, stretching into the blackness like the blade of an endless broadsword. Here and there villages rose and vanished like phantom places at the wayside; farmhouses, too, showed single lights like peering eyes; but these were rare. Sometimes they mounted slight hills where the wind whistled more fiercely and more untrammelled — rushing over the moorland, pressing in their faces, bringing

a spatter of raindrops. Above, the sky was dim and impenetrable with clouds, racing quickly. The night, indeed — a wild one for midsummer — was their saving; it hid them in its sable mantle of weeping clouds.

They had gone thus for long now, madly, fearfully; at a gallop for the most part, though sometimes at a swift trot. But time was telling; the horses were growing exhausted, their bodies heaved with their tortured breath, they were drenched with sweat, a-fleck with foam. And behind still came the pursuers — six against two. They were deep within the embraces of a stretch of woodland when Sir Michael beheld, twisting to the left, the dim whiteness of a bridle-track; in an instant he had decided — they would alter their course.

With a word to Julia to follow, he turned his horse, and soon the forging blade of the high-road was left behind them; they were deep in a world of trees. Twice they turned — once to the right, and then again to the left; twice, too, they crossed the bed of small springs which gushed coolly across the way. At last Michael drew rein, his faltering horse come to a standstill, panting.

“Julia,” said he, “we can go no further. We must rest here within the wood — there is a chance.”

Then, without a word, worn out with fatigue and distress, they led their horses into the deep shelter of the trees.

And here they stayed; Julia, wrapped in her cloak, lay on a bed of bracken near the tethered horses, while Michael, fighting against fatigue, sat on the fringe of the wood; a pistol ready to his hand, a sword across his knees. Above him the boughs swayed and tossed; fresh to his face came the touch of the wind — rain, too in sweeping gusts which drove against him in moist

clouds. For the moment there was safety — woodland sanctuary — but what of the morrow? So ran his speculations.

And Julia? Within the robe of the forest at the foot of a soaring pine Julia lay, sleeping as a child, worn out, her head pillowed on last year's leaves. But before she had cast herself to the bosom of the earth she had knelt on the crisp bracken fronds, and with her face pressed to the smooth stem of the tree, she had prayed — prayed as never before, I think, in her life.

“O God, save me, for Michael's sake — because he loves me!”

CHAPTER XXXI

AT THE "KING'S HEAD"

IT was at peering daybreak that Julia was aroused. Michael was bending over her, whispering her name — calling her from the safety of dreamland to the danger of reality. The sound of his voice and a touch from his hand awakened her instantly.

She glanced up smiling.

"You have slept?" he asked.

"Yes — and you? . . . Oh, I see that you have watched all the night-time while I have slept. How thoughtless, how selfish — poor Michael!"

She was on her feet beside him, looking in his eyes. She found a smile there.

"Believe me, dearest, last night I could never have rested. Thank God, you have been able to rest, for there must still be danger before us."

"And during your vigil — you have made plans? See how I turn to you!"

"Yes — an outline. We took last night, so far as I can judge, the road which runs southwest from Ringwood, and, therefore, we are come within five miles or less of Poole — Poole on the Harbor; that shall be our gateway to freedom. But first, I must ride thither, buy food and clothes — woman's clothes for you. I cannot be away many hours, and you should be safe here."

"You would leave me?"

"Surely it is best, it is —"

But Julia was firm.

"We go together," said she, straightening her lips.
"No, no, Michael, I cannot let you go alone."

"There can be no dangers for me."

"You are wrong, there are many. Remember that we have been seen together at Whichbury, at Fording-bridge, at Ringwood; you are as easy to be recognised as I — and if you were taken —"

She stopped, faltering, tears in her voice. Her courage drooped at the thought that Michael was leaving her. And so for a little they pleaded against each other, there in the woodland, while the wind roared firmly in the tree-tops, waving and bending the branches, scattering leaves, fretting the bracken. Anon, after much sweet caviling, pretended sternness and the rest, Sir Michael wavered, then surrendered, and together they left the green harborage. Mounting their horses, they rode forward.

There were streaks of intermittent sunlight falling earthward when, from the brow of a hill, they beheld the wide sea and the sweeping bay of Poole Harbor, dull with driven mist, stretching before them. Far out, on a sea drearily gray, a great brigantine tossed and tumbled under spreading sail, going strongly with the wind; the analogy was clear: were not they also tossed on a sea of danger and uncertainty?

Soon, with the wind beating against their faces, bluff and rough, they came down to Poole; the small port which lies close alongside, almost moored in, the shallow basin of its harbor.

As they rode through the streets, the town was already astir; venerable publicans peered, with rheumy eyes, from their doors; trim boys were taking down shutters; buxom women scrubbed steps; half a score

of mongrels were taking their morning stroll. In the air was the smell of tar, of resin, of seaweed and the breath of the waves, for it was more or less an amphibious place; a place in which one rarely lost sight of salt water or the soaring masts of anchored ships. Its inmates, too, were for the most part sailors, while every one, it seemed, had some connection with the life of the sea. In its streets were always an odd medley of folk. There were old ruffians that had sailed from the Ægean to the Caribbean, who could tell you tales by the yard of sea-serpents and whales, of storms and calms, of fights with man and beast, of wondrous countries and cities, far beyond the great curve of the Atlantic; stories of Eldorado, more marvelous and untrue than ever poor Sir Walter babbled. There were other fellows — bold enough, too, in their fashion — who enjoyed the crazy existence of the smuggler; and many more — indeed almost the entire townfolk — who were not averse to buying their brandy or their 'baccy and, now and then, a scarf or two of Flemish lace, at a reduction — though they themselves did not lend a material hand at beaching the barrels. The place swarmed, too, with many blue-garbed, ear-ringed rogues — some foreigners — who showed you rows of gleaming teeth, and cutlasses still more gleaming: rogues who had sailed under the flags of half the nations of Europe, and often, I have no doubt, beneath another pennon — the Jolly Roger. A strange, wild crew who awed as well as loved their wives and sweethearts, who awed as well many of the worthy landlubbers in the borough. Men who drank much, smoked much, and chewed more, who swore and spat, told yarns and then went off to sea, sometimes to return never, sometimes to return with a strange diversity of baggage; for the most part, it seemed, odd

bits of jewelry, a parrot or a monkey and a box of pieces of eight. They did all these things, I say — and Heaven knows what besides!

Through such a town and through a main street that was a riot of leaning roofs, bulging walls, and bottle-glass windows, Sir Michael and Julia made their way to what, on enquiry, was said to be the most comfortable inn of the place — by name the “King’s Head.” Here they dismounted and, having rapped on the door, were soon confronted by a smart serving-maid — all blue cotton, blue eyes and dimples — who smiled bewitchingly at the two gentlemen, called “Tom” in a commanding voice, and took them into the house with modest assurance.

Then, Sir Michael having said that he wished for a private room and two bedrooms with immediate breakfast, they were marched upstairs and shown into a small, though comfortable, apartment on the first floor. The place was low and raftered, furnished in a manner simple and a trifle archaic; on the right, as one entered, was the fireplace, before one the window — the latter long, low, fashioned with countless leaded panes; the whole affair stretching from the main wall, hanging, indeed, practically over the beach — for only a narrow and shelving path separated the masonry and plaster of the inn from the domain of yellow sand, seaweed, and pebbles. To the left, as one gazed through the misty glass, one could see the old harbor office and a corner of the year-stained Wool House; rightward the view was closed by jutting houses and the big rampart of the town wall; only immediately opposite (beyond the strip of water and a thin tongue of low land that shot out and ended a hundred yards or so below the “King’s Head”) could one get a full-eyed view of the sweeping

harbor, girt by its wooded hills, with Branksea Island rising tree-clad from the waters; as fore-ground there were the aërial masts and cobweb rigging of brigs, yawls, merchant-men and fishing-boats.

In this room, then — after a word or two with the neat serving-wench and a moderate interval — Julia and Sir Michael partook, with admirable appetite, of a really admirable meal.

When it was ended Julia rose from her chair and walked slowly to the window. There was thought on her face.

"Michael, may I suggest?" said she.

"If you will, you may command —"

She laughed, turning to him with dancing eyes.

"Shall I take you at your word?"

"Would you have it worthless?"

"Then, sir, I command that you sleep!"

Michael shrugged. "What an absurd, or womanish dictum," said he to himself, though his heart thrilled. Here was sweet solicitude!

"I must submit," said he. "And now the suggestion?"

"Will you permit me to ride homeward to Fovant-Chamberlayne — alone? Perhaps, after all, there will be no danger."

But to that he was not so passive in submission; he rose to his feet and went quickly toward her, his eyes almost stern.

"Julia," he began, "have I not proved myself to you — can you not trust me now? . . . But no, you must trust me; the die is long since cast, the parting of the ways too far back on the journey for us to repent that we took one of the roads in company. We must travel together — there is our way."

He pointed to the gray-green sea, dashed with white, as it tumbled without in the strengthening sunshine.

"Across the sea!"

She spoke dreamily: she was realising.

"Do you fear?"

"With you, how should I?" she answered, and her voice was very firm, the depths of her eyes wonderfully tender.

"Soon — within a few hours, a day or two at most — we shall be in sunny France, and there, in some quaint old Norman church, we shall be married. Then, man and wife, we can journey where we wish — to the cool north, to the ardent south, to mountains or plains, to rivers, seas or lakes — Julia, the world lies before us!"

He was close to her now, his hand clasped over hers, their eyes set on the crowded ships without. One thought was in their minds — there lay their way to safety and to wonderful happiness. For a little they stayed thus, then Julia drew aside.

"And now," said she, her voice full of mocking authority, "away to sleep and rest!"

"I obey, O queen," said he, and bowed over her hand.

"Say rather, O man, for now you must bid farewell forever to Wild Will — that brave-faced rogue — that saucy gentleman — that well-set fellow."

And then, when she had thrust forward her foot, and waved a ruffle-girt hand gallantly in the air, her head bent and tears came in a flood to her eyes.

"Michael, Michael," she cried, "how I have sinned!"

Like a repenting child she ran forward to his arms, seeking comfort.

It was toward noon that Julia heard a soft knock on the door and, at a word, the little maid tripped in.

To Julia — who, in her blue eyes, appeared a dashing youth, as with legs astride and hands behind coat-tails, he stared out of the window — she bobbed a curtesy, then set about clearing the table — though slowly, with many sly glances cast at the handsome gentleman in the green coat.

Five minutes or so of the silence, unbroken but for the chink of crockery and the rattle of collected knives, and Julia spoke; there was a gleam of amusement in her eyes good to see after the days of past danger and the uncertainty of those to come — but the maid saw nothing of that.

"You have rough weather — deucedly rough weather," said Julia, in tones which — if not strictly masculine — were of quite youthful depths.

"Indeed, sir, yes, sir — scarcely a boat has left the harbor this two days; such a gale o' wind for June that Harry Clayton's a-swearin' that, unless the weather bates, he won't take the gentleman to France this night — no, not if he's paid treble."

A pause, in which Julia fingered her cravat, and:

"So a gentleman is setting out — or, rather has a mind to set out — for France this evening?"

"You speak truth, sir; but few know it, though the gentleman's in Poole."

"In Poole?"

"In this house, sir." Mysteriously.

"Ah!" Julia spoke with indifference. "He arrived last night?"

"No, sir, yester noon; and since then, but for seeing Harry Clayton, he's not stirred from his room."

"And he goes this evening to France?"

"That's his purpose, sir."

Again Julia was silent, while the pert wench thought

sweetly of the handsome young gentleman as she went about her business — though slowly. At last the gentleman turned from the window and came toward her. Midway to the table Julia paused, cocked her head a shade on one side, then righted it with a smile.

“Your name, pretty one?” said she boldly, though in her heart she was trembling; she had no notion how these things should be done.

“Prue, your honor.” And Prue bobbed on her heels.

“A pretty name—to suit its owner! . . . Prue, are you faithful? Can a—a gentleman in distress—confide in you with safety?”

Prue cast up her eyes to the ceiling.

“Why, yes, your honor.”

“Good,” said Julia briefly; then, seeing the direction of Prue’s glances, she chuckled her playfully beneath the chin and turned—tantalisingly—away. Prue giggled.

“Oh, fie, sir!” she gasped. “Oh, fie, sir! And what can I do for you?”

“Perhaps it is too difficult a matter—”

“Oh, no, sir; I’m sure not.”

Julia swung round. Things seemed traveling easily.

“Well, then,” quoth she, “my friend and I wish, like the other gentleman, to cross to France.”

“Nothing so difficult in that, sir, when the wind and the —”

“There is something else; something more—personal.”

“Well, sir?”

What round blue eyes she had!

“You remember the secrecy!”

"Yes, sir. I take oath."

"There is no need for that, but remember there must be secrecy — or my neck may pay for it."

"Lord a' mercy!" cried Prue, while laughter crept at Julia's lips. She spoke with a difficulty which Prue took for strangled emotion.

"I need," said she, "a disguise."

"Disguise, sir?" Perplexity rang in Prue's voice.

"Yes, I want a disguise — a set of woman's clothes."

There — it was out now; Julia breathed more freely.

"Lord, your honor!" Prue was a trifle shocked: a young gentleman in her petticoats! "You are in danger, sir?"

"Yes, in danger; it has been, I will tell you, an affair of —"

"Love, sir?" Jubilantly.

"Yes — of love."

"A fight, sir?" Prue, silly little creature, was panting from excitement now.

"Yes, there has been a fight." There was truth, more or less, in that.

"And you, sir — did you kill your man?"

"Kill my man?" Julia for a moment was wandering.

"Yes, sir — the man you fought for the lady, sir."

Julia brought herself back from wandering thoughts to the strange little farce she was playing — time was going, too. She must get to business.

"No, Prue, I did not kill him; but it is necessary that to-night my friend and I should get to France, and I must dress as a woman — that I may travel and arrive in France as his wife. So I beg you, pretty one, to sell me one of your gowns."

Prue's finger was set at her chin; she was thinking.

"By my faith, sir, you would make a good enough girl."

"Passable, perhaps, if I were not too close to Prue."
"La," thought Julia, "love-making is easy enough — for the men!"

"So you would buy one of my gowns, sir?" With a smirk.

"I would — a skirt, a bodice, a pair of shoes, a hat, a petticoat —"

"Lord, sir, what do you know of petticoats?"

Julia flushed, and the flush was lucky.

"Truly," thought Prue, "this is a merry gentleman."

"What a man may know," said Julia, and turned away, her cheeks burning at her impudence. Then, over her shoulder: "You will get what I ask?"

"And what, sir, will you give me if I do?"

"Five crowns."

"Five crowns for a gown — and a petticoat! Fie, sir, I will tell —"

"Prue, surely you are not untruthful? Remember your promise!"

"La, sir, I profess that I'm no fibber, that I'm honest —"

"Then you will say nothing, but that, early this morning, a lady and gentleman arrived: a lady and gentleman, I repeat — man and wife."

Prue tossed her head.

"Indeed, sir, you ask a deal for five crowns."

"But to save a man from danger! Think of her for whom I have fought; she is about your height and colour!" (Julia was embroidering.)

"Oh!"

"With eyes — such eyes, by gad!" (Julia ventured, rather timorously, upon an oath.)

"Oh!"

"Blue, Prue, like yours, and lips like ripe cherries."

"She must be fair, sir!" mused Prue, who, during the confidences, had edged somewhat unnecessarily near to Julia. "And you fought for her? . . . I wonder if Harry Clayton would fight for me!"

"I'm sure that he would; men are brave, you know." (Julia was becoming anxious; was all this scheming to be in vain?) "Why, I would fight for you. . . . You will get the clothes?"

The request came again in a burst; Julia could restrain herself no longer.

"For five crowns?"

"For six crowns and —"

"What, sir?"

Julia leaned forward, smiling boldly; indeed she looked very gallant, very naughty.

"Six crowns and this," quoth she, and gave Prue a smacking kiss on the lips.

And Prue, with a cry of "Lord a' marcy" — just as if she had never expected and played for this kiss during the last half-hour — ran laughing from the room. Poor little serving-wench!

CHAPTER XXXII

DANGER THREATENS

IT was noon and after when Sir Michael, having awakened from a heavy sleep, entered the little private parlor of the "King's Head" and beheld, etched against yellow sunlight, the lithe form of a girl standing before the window. The sight surprised him and he was about to withdraw, an apology forming on his lips, when the lady turned, and Julia, eyes laughing, was before him.

"Dearest — you are wizard!" he cried.

"No. I am woman — though, perhaps, the two are not of distant kin."

"By what means have you worked this?"

"By woman's wit and man's likeness — an irresistible blending," she smiled.

"In what manner, then, have you worked this?"

"I made love to Prue — the pert maid."

"You — a woman?"

"Yes — as man."

"How does a woman know of man's love?"

"By something that a man cannot comprehend; that which we call intuition — the attribute which makes us worthy of your strength."

"I did not know that you were a philosopher."

"I am only philosopher on things which touch the heart. . . . And now — you have slept?"

"Yes, while you worked."

"'Twas not arduous; and think how little I have done for you, set beside what you have done for me; you have done so much, I so little," her voice faltered. "Remember from what you have saved me, remember that you have given me life and love — how can I repay?"

But Michael stayed her words; they wounded him.

"But I have done other things," said she quickly, "other things beside mere love-making and the mere changing of a gown. . . . I have discovered that, to-night, a ship leaves for France, bearing as passenger but one gentleman. To-night we, too, can sail to France."

Michael pursed his lips.

"How know you, Julia, that the gentleman will be prepared to have fellow-passengers?"

"I do not know, but —"

"Well?"

"The owner of the ship — the brig that lies towards the harbor mouth — is one Harry Clayton, the suitor of Mistress Prue —"

"And you think that, with more wizardry, you can make her get us aboard — whether as passengers or as stowaways."

"Yes."

"Miss Prue is fickle."

Julia shrugged.

"Is it fickle to be pleased, amused, when a wicked young traveler talks nonsense to one? Is that fickle? I know not," said she.

"You have intuition."

"Yes, but of what use is it when waged against an equal opponent?"

So they talked, lightly, gaily, in that little room set on the edge of the beach, with its ample view of the har-

bor; a view of sand — light brown and shining — of blue waters and the far-away purple of hills. For the time they were careless, forgetful; danger seemed behind them — they did not know that which was still to come.

Near five of the clock they were again seated at the round table which stood in the centre of their parlor; before them a moderate dinner. Things had gone well with them during that afternoon, for Julia — discreetly left solitary — had again had a passage of pleasantry with Miss Prue; when, after much giggling, with badinage and — on Julia's side — hopes, fears, and trepidations, they had come to a happy arrangement; nothing of less importance, indeed, than that Harry Clayton — Harry o' the Brig — should take this pair of wandering travelers over to France along with the other gentleman. So, at any rate, had been the plan; it remained to see how potent Prue's cajoleries and a round sum of money would prove with Master Harry.

Michael, as he sat within the parlor, was torn with impatience to know the result. He had tossed off the remains of his claret and had risen from the table, when suddenly there came a tap on the door, and Prue stood before them flushed from running. She bobbed a curtesy to the pair of gentlemen — as she imagined them — and set off with her story, at a gallop.

"Well, sirs," cried she, "all is as it should be, and my Harry is very ready to take you to the Frenchees, but" — she spoke now in a whisper — "the gentleman who is below is so nice as to secrecy, that not a word must be said to him, and no one must see you a-goin' on the ship. He sails at midnight — when the tide be in — and, therefore, at eleven o' the clock Harry will send a boat to the shore — close by the path that runs below the window. In that — very quiet — you will

be taken to the *Polly*, whilst t'other gentleman goes from the steps. . . . There!"

So Prue, with her plump arms akimbo.

"It is a bargain, then?" questioned Sir Michael.

Prue turned to him; she was inclined to think that perhaps, after all, the other gentleman would be more to her taste — not the cream-and-strawberry-cheeked youth who made a prettier woman than man. So, with a smile and a droop of her eyelids, she nodded and went to the door; on the threshold she blew him an impudent kiss — she knew that this strange couple were held within the hollow of her soft hand, and that she might safely venture a sly impertinence.

"A forward minx, and none too pretty," said Julia as the door closed.

Sir Michael laughed.

Of the events of that day I have, of fixed purpose, given you but glimpses, for to chronicle all would be verbiage and weariness, while to have omitted even these odd scenes — these fragments — would have been to leave you full in the dark. Enough that, in spite of dangers, uncertainties thronging around them, the hours wore away gladly for our pair of lovers.

The day died grandly, the sun falling red-hot, through clouds black as charcoal; but scarcely had the last flashes of light vanished in wild and rosy splendor behind the downs which fringe this great bowl of waters, than the clouds sailed eastward before the wind, and soon the stars shone clear and persistent from a clean-swept sky. It was now almost within two hours of midnight and, as Julia and Michael waited in the little parlor of the "King's Head," hope — keen and virile — was stirring in their hearts. All through the

lingering day they had feared to speak with certitude of their escape from the inn — their escape from Poole, from England; but now, within so short a time from the hour when the little boat should ground on the sandy fringe of the beach and they, gliding from the inn, should embark, things seemed so near, so imminent, that they spoke together with a heartwhole confidence.

During many hours now they had been alone, for Mistress Prue, it appeared, was kept busy running errands for the gentleman below — a surly fellow who drank copiously in the privacy of his small room. So, at least, Prue had asserted when at sundown she brought them lighted candles.

Together they sat silent by the window, watching the changes of the evening without, listening to the continual lap of the inflowing tide and the voices from the town — their faces caressed by the waning wind. The chiming of bells from a near church startled the spell which had caught them; softly the notes blended with the voice of the waves.

“It is the half hour,” said Michael gravely.

At his words Julia turned her head.

“Yes, a little time and — safety. Soon, soon we shall be away; the barrier of the sea between us; secure.

. . . Michael, tell me of France.”

“What, sweetheart, shall I tell of France?”

“No, I will change,” said she, laughing. “Tell me first of Italy — I have read of Italy; to me it is the home of many things beautiful, a land, whence came and where lived many of the world’s heroes. In Italy lived Brutus, Romeo, Othello — or so I like to think.”

And to her, this dear questioner, half child, half woman, he began to speak as she nestled close to him.

“In Italy I will show you mountains, purple and vel-

vety; confiding mountains that guard blue bays, white hemmed with sand where the waves wash the shores; in Italy I will show you clear skies, green woods and plains, wonderful cities —”

With a smile she held up her hand.

“Michael, I want nothing of cities.”

“Then I will lead you to none! Instead we will live within the shelter of the hills, within sight of the sea. Listen! I know a village, half hidden by the gray mist of olives — sentineled with dull cypresses; cream and honey-colored it stands, circling round an age-kissed church, glowing with frescoes; the houses slope in a wealth of gardens to the shore. There on the brink of the sea shall we live, in an old palace which seems to rise, magical, from the blue bosom of the waves —”

He paused quickly; Julia had risen to her feet — had sprung from his arms.

“What was that? I heard the sound of hoofs — coming swiftly.” She was bending from the window.

“You have broken the dream; I was in Italy.”

“Yes — and voices.”

“Where winds woo softly, the waves —”

A moment she waited, then, crossing the room with quick feet, softly turned the latch of the door. It was true! From below came the sound of trampling horses, the jingle of bits and stirrups, the voice of the landlord, and the laughter, somewhat nervous, of Miss Prue. The sounds frightened Julia, set all her fears a-working; words were forming on her lips as Michael stepped to her side. She seized his arm with fervent hands.

“What is it?” she gasped.

“Listen!” said he.

Dimly the sounds floated up to them; with difficulty

they caught the words. It was the landlord who spoke. He seemed to be refuting something — some suggestion; the sentences came in fragments; other sounds drowned his voice: “No, I know nought — nor a murder — Lor, no — not hereabouts — not a breath.”

It seemed a conversation set in the negative. Then another spoke.

“Are there any guests?”

“Yes — two parties. A single gentleman about to leave for France — lady and gentleman — I? — no — was a-bed when they came — not a morsel of luggage — bain’t seen ’em —”

That was truth. Julia and Sir Michael had arrived too much betimes for that — arrived when, no doubt, the worthy host was still a-snoring in his nightcap. Neither did he know anything of his two guests except what Prue had told him, and Julia had coached her well in her story. Who else had seen them? The ostler “Tom,” whom Prue had called. Again there was safety there; Julia had been already within the house when the man had appeared from the stables. The townsfolk? Perhaps; but what to them was a couple of travel-stained gentlemen riding through their streets at seven o’ the morning when so many strangers came to the sea-port? How should they know that one of the said gentlemen had been metamorphosed, since arrival, into glowing woman? Indeed, for to-night at all events, the townsfolk were beyond the question — safely a-bed and unlikely to arise and give evidence. The hour was late; only a score or so of sailors would be found in the taverns if evidence should be sought. So ran Michael’s thoughts, and so, too — in large measure — ran Julia’s as they listened to the altercation below — the dialogue between the landlord of the

“King’s Head” and the men of law. They were telling the story of the murder now, the story of Wild Will’s last escapade; recounting the pursuit of last night, the tale of their weary search all through that day, how a couple of travelers from Poole to Sherborne had led them a wild dance, how —

And Julia and Michael drew back from the door. They had heard enough, they knew that they were trapped; those few words, reaching to them through the dimness, had been their sentence. In the candle-light, within the little parlor, Julia’s face was death-white as she hung on Michael’s arm.

“Michael,” she whispered, “it is I they seek; let me go to them — perhaps they will spare you —”

Then, as smiling he shook his head, there came the sound of fleet footsteps to drive them apart; in a moment Prue was before them — terror in her eyes.

“Quick, quick!” she cried, “to the window. Lord save us! You never told me ’twas Wild Will that I gave my gown to. But I’ll help you for your face. Quick, though, quick! We must jump from the window — ’tish’t far, and soft landing — the boat should be here by now. . . . Wild Will — the idea!”

Even as she spoke, the excited, wild-eyed little creature had crossed to the window and was leaning out into the darkness, one hand curved round the shell of her ear. An interval of listening followed — a time of dragging seconds, pregnant with dread; in which the tension clutched and tortured Julia as she stood there — tortured so that she wished to scream, to break the century of silence, to fly downward to the waiting men, crying her guilt, so as to end the agony of waiting. Could there be hope?

Then, very soft, the plash of distant oars floated up

to them. Prue turned triumphantly from the window, her cheeks crimson with a sudden delight.

"Saved — you are saved." she cried. "'Tis Harry; now to the boat!"

But even as she spoke it seemed too late. Men were mounting the stairs; in a moment a knuckle was tapping on the panels of the open door. They had lost! — the shadow was on the threshold.

With a whispered word to Julia — a message, even at that hour, of courage and of hope — Sir Michael crossed the room and stepped out into the narrow passage, closing the door firmly. Before him in the darkness, barely dispersed by the gleam of the lanthorn set on the wall at the foot of the stairs, rose the bulky form of an officer of excise. They stood on a small landing, above their heads the roof rising into a gable, hollow and beam-crossed; below fell the dusty steps, echoing now to voices, loud, excited, husky. Yet from the landing — the stage on which Sir Michael was to fight for the woman who to him meant all the world — he could see but half of the staircase, for it twisted back on itself, so that the passage in which the men were crowded was immediately below his feet. He beheld merely half a dozen steps, at the foot of which was a square of flooring dominated by a small door — the room of the other guest, no doubt.

For a moment Sir Michael glanced keenly about him, then turned to the officer.

"You wish, I believe, to speak with me?" said he. "We will parley here if you have no objections; there is no need to intrude on my wife."

"Your wife?" The man drew back in surprise. He was a burly fellow, one of the party which had followed our fugitives from Whichbury, not of those

who, three nights ago now, had ridden with Sir Michael to the Manor.

"My wife." There was truth enough in that; they were sworn to each other.

"But, sir —" The man's face appeared like a note of exclamation.

"Remember I know little of your business; whom did you look to see?"

"Wild Will, the highwayman. We thought that you were the gentleman who rode through Ringwood and Fordingbridge with him."

"I rode here with a lady — my wife."

The man looked a trifle nonplused. Certainly little Prue had informed him that the gentleman had arrived with a lady, but —

"May I see — your wife, sir?" He spoke a little sheepishly, and Michael raised his brows as if in surprise.

"As you wish," he said, and turning to the door, he opened it. "Julia, will you come — Julia?"

For a full minute it seemed that she had not heard his words — in that minute things shifted; the puppets of the drama re-set themselves. The officer moved from the landing down a couple of stairs so as to make place for Julia when she should come, and the men started to crowd up from below; the landlord first, puffing with heat and importance, and after him the rest of the excise, and a riff-raff of seamen — harbor and tavern loafers called by news that Wild Will, the famous robber of the highway, was among them, fresh from murder. In the lanthorn light they did not present a pretty array of faces; they were coarse and evil-looking in the sickly oil-glare; murmuring, too, ominously one to another, tingling for a fight,

There before them — like a goddess showing herself to mortals — stepped Julia, and stood passive in the frame of the door. Clad in the simple gray gown which Prue had brought her, she appeared an exquisite vision of girlhood — something of pure goodness. The waiting men drew in their breath quickly.

“Is this your Wild Will?” asked Michael boldly; perhaps even yet he might win with bluffing.

To this question many shook their heads, some growled out a “No,” and cemented the monosyllabic negative with an oath. Only one or two raised voices of enquiry, of dissatisfaction at being spoiled of the sport of catching a criminal ripe for the gallows. But they were soon quieted; they all seemed spell-bound by the vision; talking together in whispers, staring with their wild eyes. The excisemen, too, were speaking to each other below their breath, discussing, hesitating as to what next to do, how to interrogate this amazing pair; cursing at their failure, if failure it was, to capture this Wild Will, and with him the offered reward. So five minutes fled.

Meanwhile, Julia and Michael stood at the doorway, wondering what would happen — how things would work. Presently Michael’s eyes were drawn to that little door which stood just by the minute landing, scarce more than a yard square, that was set at the twist of the old stairs; a thin line of light had suddenly grown there, as if the door — barely to be seen in the dim light — had been cautiously opened. For a moment it lay there, a streak of gold on the dusky oak, then it was half obscured by the shadow of a man within.

It did not strike him with fear, this little happening in light and shade — he was merely interested, curious; he was, indeed, at that moment, full of a well-hid ex-

citement and joy. Did it not seem that by this simple device — the coming of Julia to the stair-head to be seen of them all — they had found a way to safety? Surely within little time now they would quit this inn, would enter the waiting boat!

Another half minute of inaction and Sir Michael stepped forward; somehow he felt that the moment had come when he should speak for himself. He faced the crowd.

“Gentlemen,” said he, and his eyes flashed, “will you permit this lady and myself to retire? I think that now you are satisfied — are confident — that neither she nor I have anything in common with the Wild Will of whom all the country seems talking. Yet, as I have brought you here only to be disappointed, I think it only fitting that you should have the pleasure of drinking to this lady’s and my safe journey through life — on which, I confess, we have only just embarked — at my expense. I do not think that you will object. Am I right?”

There was a laugh, a chorus of “Ay, ay!” and “Thank ’e, sir!” and the crowd were about to march down the stairs, bearing with them the somewhat discomfited and still undecided excisemen, when from the small square landing came the sound of a scuffle, of someone speaking with hoarse, inarticulate words. Then Michael saw that the slit of light had widened, that the door was flung wide; and in place of the shadow and the light stood a man, dimly seen in the depths of the oaken patch; a man who stood with a hand upraised, pointing an accusing finger. One of the sailors turned the hanging lanthorn so that its beams fell full on the newcomer’s features. They were the features of Daniel Bulstrode.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE FIGHT ON THE STAIRS

THE sound of scuffling — the shifting of feet which had been necessary to give Bulstrode place — had subsided; there was a deep, unbroken pause in which all eyes were fixed on the man who strove to speak, watching his lips as they trembled — mumbled to form words. At last they came — in a torrent. He spoke directly to Sir Michael, standing a trifle below him, his fierce, contorted features showing ugly in the light.

“You lie,” he cried wildly, “you lie! This is the robber whom they seek, this girl! I know now; I saw her dressed as a man, I tell you, the night of the murder. She is Wild Will — Wild Will! I swear it.”

His words, hoarse and guttural, came like a thunder-clap; they seemed to paralyse not only the motley crowd which blocked the stairs, but Julia and Michael. There was a tense silence, then Julia swayed backward against the panels of the closed door, her hand clutching at her bosom, her face white as sea-foam. As Michael sprang to her side, Bulstrode’s voice rose again.

“Look — look how she writhes! I tell you it’s the truth. She did the murder — she — this hell-cat. Murderess — thief. Take her — seize her. Justice, justice! I swear to you all I saw her as a man, rigged like you or I — blood on her hands — take her! Kill her!”

The drunken man raved on, waving his arms above

the packed heads; beckoning those who were behind him, urging forward those who stood on the highest step, nearest to the chief figures of the drama — pressing upward so that they crowded around the officer who first had summoned Sir Michael from the parlor.

Then arose a riot — a babel of voices, cries and oaths, as the men from below pushed upwards. What was the truth? Surely this ranting drunkard was not to be believed in? Yet mark how she had quivered — swooned backward against the door; how white her cheeks had bleached, how white! Ah! there was the landlord, puffing with difficulty through the jostling, seething mass of men. Who had sent for him? The officer had passed down the word. Slowly, cumbrously, the worthy man wedged his bulk through the sea of humanity, up to a step beyond the little landing and the twist of the stairs where stood Bulstrode, frantic still and shouting. The officer held up his hand.

“Hush! hush!” cried someone, and gradually, as the crash of a breaking wave dies, the voices subsided; every one waited, a-tiptoe with excitement. It was the exciseman who spoke.

“Mr. Landlord,” said he, “I should be obliged if you will tell us all that you may know of this lady and this gentleman.”

“I know little, zur.”

“Then tell us that little.”

With a finger raised to a spot just behind his ear, and scratching slightly at his scalp, the man cleared his throat, then:

“They be come, zur, this morning afore I was up, an’ I h’ant seen ’em till this minute; only our wench ’a seen ’em — our Prue. She come to me soon as I was dressed; ’bout ten o’clock, for I lie long a-bed now, being

terrible stiff with the rheumatics — and 'a told me that a lady and gentleman be come early and were then in t' parlor. To-day they've eaten and drank, and that be all I know; that's all —"

But here he was cut short; a voice rose from below.

"You're wrong, mister, it were two gent'men who came this morning; leastways neither o' the horses had a lady's saddle, so I s'pose they were both gent'men."

"Who's that speaking?" Thus the excise officer, very peremptory.

"I be Tom the ostler."

"Ah! . . . You saw these two travelers, Tom?"

"I only see one; Miss Prue a-called me from the yard, and when I got to th' door, only one of 'em was there —"

A gasp of interest greeted these revelations. Tom felt himself a hero, a man of importance, as he stood halfway up the first flight of stairs in the press of men. But attention swerved. Bulstrode again took the stage.

"What can be clearer proof?" he cried, his voice at a shout, his hand raised high above his head. "There we have them — a hot trail. Didn't I tell you that she was aping the man? Didn't I tell you that she was Wild Will? Come on, lads, at them, take them; what do these excisemen know of law and justice, when they leave her standing there untouched? But *we* will do justice; forward, lads — take her — seize the thieving hussy —"

Then, as the man raved on, the excise powerless to hinder, Sir Michael beheld a shifting of positions, so far, that is, as was possible, among the crowded men. They seemed to be straining; a new look came to their

features, their mouths grew grim, their eyes flashed; he knew that they were becoming dangerous, wild for sport, for excitement; at any moment they might swarm upwards and surround him — to take him and her, even as Bulstrode suggested. Michael whispered in Julia's ear as she lay in the support of his arms.

"Go, dearest, into the parlor, and then lower yourself from the window. Take Prue, tell her everything — we must trust her. Quick — quick, while there is time. I will follow you — I swear it. Await me a few minutes in the boat; there is still hope."

Then, all his love, surging within his heart, he kissed her twice upon the brow. A moment, and she had slipped through the door. He turned to the crowd calmly, his hand upon his sword.

A roar, hoarse and fierce, greeted him; a howl of strangled rage from Bulstrode and, "She's gone! now on, after!" he cried.

"Yes, after her!" The words rose in a torrent of sound — the hounds had slipped their leashes. In a flash Michael saw the glint of cutlasses — half-moons of flame in the darkness — upraised fists, menacing arms, heard the babble of voices; was fronted with a wilderness of upturned fierce faces, flushed and sweating; gaunt bearded faces in which one beheld the gleam of teeth, the white speck of an eyeball. In the midst was Bulstrode, livid now as death, with scarlet splashes on his cheeks.

They were pressing forward, thrusting in a living mass behind the officer who was at their head, when Michael's sword flashed out and was set at the level of a man's heart, toward the crowd. For a moment there came a pause as the man attempted to back from the imminent point; then the strength of the throng pushed

upward, and — as a shout of menace, a *mêlée* of oaths and laughs and calls rose — one of the excise found himself face to face with Sir Michael, together upon the strip of landing without the parlor door. He drew his sword.

“Guard!” cried Michael, and the blades met — hissing, kissing, quivering! So began the duel.

For a while they fought wildly, madly, in a whirl of thrust and parry, and the men watched spell-bound — for the time held back. No sound was heard but the heavy breathing of the two combatants and the rattle of the swords. Then Sir Michael’s blade slipped forward and pierced his man straight through the shoulder; a howl of anger went echoing to the low roof, and in an instant the crowd sprang upward. He felt strong arms grasping him, tearing at his legs, seizing him as he pulled with all his strength at the pommel of his sword, so that he might free it from the body of his wounded adversary. At last it came — with horrible smoothness — and the men, as they again beheld the blade, dripping blood, for a moment relaxed their grip. Michael sprang away so that he could face the stair-head, his back to the door. And now his sword thrust out like the gleaming tongue of a serpent, hither and thither in lightning lunges amongst the foremost men, as they were thrust forward, pitilessly from below. To his ears rose the sound of groans among the din; hot blood spurted over his fingers; to his nostrils came the smell of it, mingled with the reek from the flaring lamp; blood danced scarlet, crimson, flame before his eyes; but still he fought on, waiting for his chance, the moment — if ever it came — when he could slip behind the solid panel of the door.

For what to Sir Michael seemed an eternity — though

the time could almost have been counted in seconds — he battled like a beast at bay, his sword sweeping before him in a semi-circle of death beyond which the flock of men, ill-armed as they were, could not pass. Then things altered; as Sir Michael raised his eyes, during a second, from the quick lunges of his sword he beheld the muzzle of a pistol pointed straight at him — not six feet away — tilted slightly upwards; above its gleaming barrel Bulstrode's face appeared mocking.

For a flash of time Sir Michael seemed paralysed in mind and limb, unable to move, powerless to think — he stared as one turned to ice: then came the awakening. He sprang forward, gave a lunging blow straight in the face of the man who trameled him, and looked into the black muzzle of the pistol. A quick movement followed and, just as Bulstrode's finger pulled at the trigger, Sir Michael's sword cut down, heavy with force, full on the bright metal of the barrel. The shot forged a way into the blood-wet floor.

Now was Sir Michael's chance! In the throttling smell of gunpowder, with the thick reek of smoke rising upward to the black rafters, the place echoing to groans and curses and shouts, Michael turned, flung aside the door of the parlor, dashed through and closed it again, with a crash, behind him. A moment — a moment in which he heard the crowd surging anew up the stairs — and he had crossed the room, climbed to the narrow ledge of the window and, lowering himself without, he let himself drop to the full stretch of his arms — then relinquished his hold. He fell easily, a matter of six feet or so, to the narrow pathway which ran close beneath the stout walls of the "King's Head."

Before him stretched a meagre width of sand merging into the darkness of water, while at the edge, where

lay a tiny fringe of foam, a darker shadow of the night showed that a boat rocked gently — just floating.

“Quick — quick, dear Michael,” cooed a voice softly to him and, even before the tones had died, he had crossed the strip of sand and felt around his feet the cool kisses of the water as he pushed the boat’s prow away from the shore.

“Right; we’re off,” came a voice, and he scrambled aboard.

With Julia and Sir Michael seated forward, Prue cowering in a huddled mass near to them, and Harry Clayton rowing at the stern with a single oar — gondolier-fashion for silence — they shot out on the smooth bosom of the harbor. But their eyes were fixed on the square of yellow light which hung behind them in the blackness — the window of the room through which Sir Michael had just come. Men were crowding there; they heard — for little distance separated them — the voices, the tones, the words of those who thronged around it. Next Bulstrode pushed forward; they could see his bulking shadow against the orange light; heard his voice cry:

“Od’s life, they’re gone — follow — follow —!”

Then, even as they watched, he leaped to the window-sill, clutched his fingers at the woodwork above him, and prepared to jump; they saw him let fall his hands, saw his body heave forward, then his whole form bent and described an arc in mid-air. His feet had caught at the sill, and he fell forward, head downward, on the sand. Julia closed her eyes, and Michael, as he held her in his arms, felt a trembling shudder run through her; the thud of Bulstrode’s falling body and a sharper,

quicker sound — like the striking of something against a stone — had been borne to them on the wind.

And now, with quick, wriggling strokes, Harry Clayton sent the boat forward over the dim water, forward to where the ship lay with sails set — like a great falcon waiting to be freed from her jesses. Behind them still, though fainter, came shouts and cries, rending the silence; on the little width of sand they could see dark stooping figures bending over something which lay on the ground in the flicker of lanthorns. Then, suddenly, a tongue of flame leaped out of the gloom, a licking tongue of fire; a shot sang past them as they sped forward, and sank, with a slash of foam, into the water. Another came — and another.

Michael leaned forward.

“A hundred pounds if you bring us safe to France.”

Prue laughed; even in the stress the thought that her Harry might capture a hundred pounds made her merry.

“La, sir, we must not wait for the other gentleman. Mr. Bulstrode will have to take another boat,” said she.

“Bulstrode?” Thus Michael.

“Yes; him that was to sail for France to-night in my Harry’s brig,” quoth Prue.

Michael nodded quietly in the darkness. Now he knew why Bulstrode had traveled to Poole; he, too, it seemed, had wished to flee for France — with the miser’s hoard. There would be surprises indeed when the excise — or some others — searched his room at the “King’s Head.”

So ran Sir Michael’s thoughts as they glided forward across the water. Presently, feeling a touch on his arm, he glanced up; Harry was bending over him.

"We're followed," whispered the man. "Look, they've launched a boat; we can't do it, sir, three pair of oars will be too strong for us."

With a muttered oath he set a fresh twist of tobacco between his teeth. The loss of a hundred pounds was no small matter to him; besides, was he not doing his best to aid a pair of renegades in escaping from justice? Already Harry imagined the Arm of the Law stretching toward him.

Meanwhile Sir Michael, with a pang of dread, turned in the direction from whence they had come, and, in a flash, realised that the sailor spoke truth — a longboat was forging out from the shore, crowded with men. Soon he could distinguish dark forms bending feverishly at the oars, could catch the sound of voices as the rowers were urged forward. No, there was little chance of escape, little chance of eluding their pursuers in the darkness, for the moon was rising and already the east was pale with light.

For a time Sir Michael sat silent, overwhelmed. He feared to rouse Julia and tell her that they were defeated; that, in spite of all, they were followed and, without doubt, would be overtaken. Joyously he would fight a score of men — nay, he would strive against fifty — to shield her from harm, but to confess failure was bitter. He knew that she would face the danger bravely, knew that she would not flinch; but he knew, too, that she must realise what failure meant. Let her rest a few minutes in peace, let her —

But even as Sir Michael hesitated, he felt a hand seeking his in the darkness; in a moment Julia had risen from the bottom of the boat, where she and Prue had sought shelter from the flight of shots, and was at his side,

"Michael," she said, and her voice was calm and steady, "I know . . . they are pursuing . . . we must be brave."

"I fear only for you," he answered.

"And I only for you," whispered she, and she laughed — almost happily. It was easy to face danger with him at her side and, even now, she could not realise that they were trapped; could not realise that this, perhaps, was the last moment of her life in which she would be near him; that the kiss he pressed on her cheek was the last his lips would give.

And so, side by side, they waited the end of the pursuit; there in the little boat, with Prue cowering at their feet and Harry standing idle at the stern. It was useless to attempt escape now, for the moon had risen and her beams fell full upon them; moment by moment the pursuers were gaining, and soon, mingled with the sound of voices, they could hear the shriek of oars in the rowlocks; the hiss of parting waters at the bow of the coming boat.

Within ten minutes all was over. To Julia it was a nightmare scene at which her heart quailed, in spite of her vaunted courage. For a moment she clung to Sir Michael, all her love surging within her, then she turned and faced her enemies. Rough hands were laid on her, rough voices spoke to her; then she knew that the boat was turned again toward the shore.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A WAR OF WORDS

IT is to the parlor at the "King's Head" that we must now follow Sir Michael, for thither he was taken, guarded securely by a posse of men. Julia was entrusted to Prue's care.

So swift had been the march of events that as Sir Michael entered the little room he could scarcely realise all that had occurred since first they had come there. To him it seemed only a moment ago that Julia and he had stood by the window on the point of flight; only a moment ago when they heard the sound of voices below and danger had threatened. And all the subsequent happenings — the fight on the stairs, the escape, the race across the harbor and the final capture — seemed like a dream, through which he had walked mechanically. Yet how his emotions and passions had been roused!

But there was one difference in the position — Bulstrode was dead. That fall from the window, which they had witnessed, had been his end; in his frenzied impatience he had caught his foot on the sill and tumbled head foremost on the rough-paved path below. They found him stone-dead, with an ugly wound on his temples.

Sir Michael had heard the news with something of a thrill. In an instant he realised that their most dangerous enemy was disposed of; the only one, indeed, who possessed evidence concerning the identity of Wild

Will. Before Bulstrode's appearance things had gone in their favor; Sir Michael's words had well-nigh convinced the excise of his innocence when Bulstrode came upon the scene; the sight of Julia, pale and beautiful, had won the hearts of the crowd. "How could she be this Wild Will?" they had questioned. "This girl a robber and murderer?" Yes, all would have gone well, had it not been for that fatal interruption. And now? Sir Michael dared not hope, but surely there was a faint gleam of light in the darkness which surrounded them! the swift judgment on Bulstrode was at least a factor to be reckoned with.

Sir Michael had been brought to the little parlor in order to avoid the crowd below; it appeared that the excise officer wished for some further explanation of affairs. A Justice of the Peace, too, had been summoned from his bed — a man of some position and one who would be likely to assist materially in unraveling the tangle of mysteries which clung around the name of Wild Will.

Soon this worthy entered, and having bowed perfunctorily to the occupants of the room — the excise-man, the inn-keeper, and one or two more — he crossed over to the officer and fell immediately into a long and whispered conversation. Sir Michael, meanwhile, sat by the window gazing out to the smooth waters of the harbor, now flooded with moonlight. Deprived as he was of his arms, the men feared from him no attempt at escape; besides, not only was the little parlor well guarded, but the inn was watched by groups of men — eager and intent. There was no chance for even the boldest ruse to succeed.

During an hour, it seemed, Sir Michael waited, and all the while his thoughts were racing, his wits striving

to determine how best he might take advantage of the fact of Bulstrode's death. But at length the colloquy between the Justice and the officer ended, and the latter crossed the room to where sat the prisoner.

"Sir," said the officer, "this is Mr. Lanton, to whom I have given particulars of the affair. He would like to put certain questions to you."

Sir Michael rose and bowed. A light of hope had sprung to his eyes. What did this mean? — this politeness, this suggestion of civil questioning! For a moment he was silent, then:

"I shall be very glad to acquaint Mr. Lanton of the affair, so far as lies in my power," said he calmly. His nerves were braced now; his mind determined as to the course he would follow.

As he finished speaking the gentleman came forward. He was a brisk little being, spruce and trim even at that hour; the possessor of a well-shaped head and a pair of keen, though kindly, eyes, which peered at one with an amiable scrutiny from behind gold-rimmed spectacles. His whole appearance gave the impression that he was somewhat self-satisfied and authoritative; with the excise officer he had been brusque — even a trifle imperious. Now, having crossed the room, he motioned Sir Michael to his chair and seated himself close beside him.

"It seems, sir," said he in a harsh, dry voice which resembled the crackling of parchment, "that my worthy friend the officer of excise has been somewhat precipitate in this matter; for, so far as I am able to judge, this unfortunate business has been brought about simply on the instigation of a gentleman — now, unfortunately, no longer able to speak for himself — who was under the influence of drink. By the words and accusations of this Mr. Bulstrode, you (he swept his

hand around him as if he included the entire population of Poole) have been incited to actions the results of which have been — shall we say? — disastrous. You believed the word of a drunkard against that of Sir Michael Stanton; you even believed his monstrous assertion that this gentleman's wife was none other than Wild Will. . . . To me it appears that it was all a gross mistake. . . . Of course, I do not deny that there are many things which must be satisfactorily explained, but I have little doubt that Sir Michael will be able to supply those explanations."

Mr. Lanton had hitherto addressed the room at large. Now he turned to our hero.

"Sir," continued he, "I should be infinitely obliged if you will inform me on the following point: Firstly, for what reason did you and this lady gallop across more than half a county last night; secondly, for what reason —"

But Sir Michael cut him short. Here, surely, was chance! with the officer — slow-witted and obstinate — things would be difficult; but with Mr. Lanton — intelligent but by no means brilliant — argument should be easy. His heart leaped with new-found hope; he saw his course plain before him.

"Sir," quoth Michael, "I will gladly reply to your questioning, but first, if you please, permit me to inform you of one or two matters unknown to the officer. It is a long story, I fear, but I will be brief as may be. I have your permission? . . . To commence, sir, I must go back some weeks to an event which has been the cause of all these happenings — I refer to my encounter with Wild Will."

"Ah!" put in Mr. Lanton, "I was not aware that you were among his victims."

"Unfortunately, yes. I was held up and robbed within a few miles of Salisbury."

"And you recognise Bulstrode and Wild Will as one and the same?"

At these words a murmur of surprise ran round the room, mingled with whisperings and ejaculations of astonishment. But Sir Michael was silent for a time; he was endeavoring to realise what this suspicion might mean to Julia and him.

"Is that your opinion?" he questioned at length.

"Certainly," said Mr. Lanton. "I think there is little doubt of it. You are surprised, sir?"

"Candidly, yes — the idea is new to me. I confess, sir, that the thought had not entered my mind; one does not suspect a gentleman of highway robbery whom one meets at the house of a gentleman! Remember, I first became acquainted with Bulstrode at Fovant Manor. But, of course, your deductions —"

Then Sir Michael laughed and swore an oath of amazement at Mr. Lanton's acumen. The laugh rang true, and Sir Michael thanked Heaven!

"You must know," he continued when silence was again restored — for the exciseman had continued loud in astonishment at this new turn of affairs; "you must know, sir, that Wild Will not only emptied my pockets but sent a bullet through my ribs, and this wound compelled me to remain some weeks at the village of Fovant-Chamberlayne, and there it was that, by chance, I became acquainted with Mr. Vane and his daughter. Things progressed apace and, within a week, Miss Vane had promised to be my wife. But the course of our love ran far from smooth, for the lady's father had other intentions concerning her; he gave no sanction to our

affection, and thus, in a measure, fell out the events of which you are aware."

"But, sir," cried Mr. Lanton, "there are many points still unexplained."

"The explanation, sir, lies in one word — Love. Ah, you smile, and perhaps now, so may I, but this same love has led Miss Vane and myself into grave danger. . . . Primarily, it was the motive for the forming of a scheme rash and unwise perhaps — the scheme for an elopement! We arranged things with a due regard to details; it was planned that we should meet one morning and escape together to France. But things fell out amiss; I was late for the *rendez-vous*. A laggard, you will say, but you must blame circumstances and not the lover, for during the night previous to the proposed elopement news was brought me — you remember that, Mr. Officer? — of the crime which had been committed at the Manor, and thither I went immediately; to find, as you know, sir, Mr. Vane lying dead and no trace to be found of his daughter."

Here Mr. Lanton held up his hand.

"This is news," he said. "The explanation?"

"Miss Vane will herself be best able to recount subsequent events," answered Sir Michael. "May I call her?"

For a moment Mr. Lanton was silent, a thoughtful frown between his eyes, then:

"Certainly, certainly," he murmured.

Sir Michael rose to his feet and crossed to the door of the little room where waited Julia and Prue. Knocking softly on the panels, he waited for an answer and then entered. Julia stood before him, calm and very pale; in a moment she was in his arms.

“Courage, dearest, courage,” he whispered; “there is still hope. You must be brave and answer fearlessly. I have told them that our flight was an elopement, your disguise a safeguard to prevent discovery; best of all, they think that Bulstrode was Wild Will. Come, can you face them?”

With a little sound, half sigh, half sob, Julia smiled at him; then, hand in hand, they returned to the parlor. Prue followed.

At their entrance Mr. Lanton rose to his feet and bowed.

“There are, ma’am,” said he, “a few matters of which I should like your account. Believe me, I regret that you should be thus disturbed, but —”

He finished with a bow. Julia nodded; she could not speak for the moment, her thoughts raced too fast.

“Then, ma’am, will you oblige me by recounting the events at the Manor on the night of Wild Will’s crime.”

In the slight pause which followed, Sir Michael was fearful. Had he told Julia enough — had she sufficient foundation — sufficient knowledge of what had passed — on which to build her version of the story? But there was no need for fear; her courage did not fail.

Clearly and distinctly she recounted how, on the night of the murder, she had returned to her room and how, as she was engaged in trying on her clothes which were to be her disguise — here she blushed prettily — she had been disturbed by Bulstrode. Lightly she touched on that grim episode, briefly narrated her escape and flight; how she had missed the time of meeting with Sir Michael and even how — and this was a master-stroke — at a lonely farm-house, she had posed

as Wild Will, and by threats, obtained food and the wherewithal to write a message to Sir Michael.

"But, ma'am," said Mr. Lanton, who had laughed hugely at the last episode, "why did you not return to the Manor?"

For a moment Julia stood dumb and Sir Michael quailed; he knew how their fate lay swaying in the balance, how dangerous was the game they played. But Julia did not falter.

"Sir," said she, "I returned to the park, but, seeing the excisemen around the house, I was fearful. Besides, sir, a woman does not — you must remember, sir, my — my disguise."

"'Twas only natural!" put in Prue pertly. "La, I'm ashamed of you all for putting the lady to such distress."

A laugh rang through the room.

Then Sir Michael took up the tale. Briefly he described how he had obeyed Julia's summons to the Yew Wood, briefly told how still she had wished to go with him, to leave behind the Manor and its gaunt associations. Next he told them of their departure from the wood and of their ride to Fordingbridge; how they had been pursued and had grown fearful that they might be charged with crime (he reminded Mr. Lanton of Julia's escapade as Wild Will) and how that they wished no hindrance to their marriage and journey to France.

Soon all was said; the sequence of events narrated up to their arrival at the inn; even the fight on the stairs was described — how Michael had fought for his life against Bulstrode and his accomplices. And all the while as he spoke Sir Michael gained hope and assurance; surely Fortune had turned smiling toward

them, surely, now, the dangers and difficulties were past! But it had been hard fighting, requiring every nerve, every spark of energy. Only when all was done did he dare to realise the perils of the path which they had taken, the hundred pit-falls into which they might so easily have stepped.

It was Mr. Lanton who broke the silence which followed Sir Michael's story.

"Sir," said he, "I am infinitely obliged for the trouble which you have taken to acquaint me of these matters; for the manner in which you have aided in —"

But here the officer interrupted; for a time he had been silent and glum, but now he would be silent no longer. His sagacity was in question, his astuteness in doubt.

"Mr. Lanton, sir," quoth he, "we have heard these stories and we must, I suppose, believe 'em —"

"Of course, of course." Thus the Justice.

"But what's to prove that Mr. Bulstrode was Wild Will? What's to prove —"

Here, however, he in his turn was interrupted. A knock sounded on the door and a voice shouted through the panel:

"Someone to see the officer; one of his men from Salisbury way."

"Ah," said Mr. Lanton, "more news perhaps."

A shiver ran through Julia, as the officer went out.

Within ten minutes he returned, alone but the bearer of valuable information. The man who had just arrived — one of the band which had been at Fovant-Chamberlayne two nights ago — brought news how, on further search at the Manor, the excisemen had discovered a hat and cloak which had been identified as

belonging to Bulstrode; a hat and cloak by which he was often recognised in the neighborhood. A further item of interest followed: a large sum of money had been found in the room which Bulstrode had occupied at the "King's Head"—guineas by the hundred, packed snug in a little valise which he himself had unstrapped from his horse's crupper; Tom, the ostler, said that he had been very particular in the matter.

As the officer ended his recital, Mr. Lanton turned to the group of men at the further end of the room. A smile was on his lips; his eyes were twinkling.

"I shall, of course," said he, "be happy to consider any supplementary evidence that the officer can obtain which may aid in proving that the late Mr. Bulstrode was *not* Wild Will; but, for myself, I am completely satisfied. Everything supports my theory as to the identity of this bold villain. Not only have we certain knowledge that Bulstrode was at the Manor on the night of the murder, we now find that he was the possessor of a considerable sum of money—a portion, undoubtedly, of the miser's stolen hoard. Not only—"

But to recount in detail Mr. Lanton's statement of affairs—which was, I may tell you, somewhat prosy and verbose—would be wearisome. Suffice it that, after some farther questioning, some further information given, a point touched on here and there, the gentleman declared himself without shred of doubt in regard to the true explanation of affairs. Indeed, why should he be dubious? The story told by Julia and Sir Michael had been clear and plausible; so far as Mr. Lanton might judge there were no discrepancies, it tallied precisely with the excise officer's version. Moreover, it was truth, stark truth; Sir Michael had but slightly embroidered one fact—the matter of the

elopement had called for his imagination in slight degree.

There was, however, another point, of which Mr. Lanton had still to be informed: I mean the fact that, not yet, had Julia and Sir Michael been made man and wife. But even in this matter Mr. Lanton was all satisfaction and affability.

"Sir," said he, when he had been told how things stood, "permit me to recommend you to my worthy friend, the Rev. Matthew Faulkner, vicar of the church of St. Peter; he will tie the knot firmly and speedily. Indeed, sir, within a few hours the ceremony can be completed and you, if you wish, may be well on your way to France. Time has swept by swiftly while we have sat here; why, 'tis almost five o' the clock, and —"

But the remainder of Mr. Lanton's remark was stifled in a prodigious yawn.

CHAPTER XXXV

CONCLUSION

THERE remains but little to be told, for during the following hours things moved apace.

In the parlor which had been the scene of so many strange happenings Sir Michael and Julia formed their plans. Following the advice of Mr. Lanton they would approach the Rev. Faulkner as early as possible, and, should he be willing and a special license obtainable, they would be married on the spot; then set sail for France. There, for a while, they would seek sanctuary, wait on events. Sir Michael deemed it wiser and Julia, too, was eager. She longed for a flight, new scenes and faces; she feared to return to the Manor; the shadow of the past was too near. With Michael at her side, in the sunshine of France, she could learn to forget and be happy.

Fate smiled. At an early interview the worthy parson promised Sir Michael that he would gladly perform the ceremony — for a goodly fee, I may mention — and all was arranged. As to the voyage to France, Harry o' the Brig would take them.

And so, as the venerable clock of St. Peters was chiming nine, Michael and Julia — new-made man and wife, and as gallant a pair of lovers as had ever been seen in Poole! — stood once again by the little craft in which they had attempted flight.

Half the town, it seemed, was crowded on the strip

of shore before the "King's Head"—a goodly number of whom had followed them from the church, where there had been fully a hundred witnesses to the simple service. The story of the elopement—for it spread as if by magic—had set all the romance a-throb in the bosoms of the rough sailors, and the sight of Julia, radiantly beautiful, roused all their compassion and sympathy. They cursed themselves roundly for the part which they had played in the doings of the night.

Julia and Prue (for it had been arranged that Prue should accompany them—she knew too much to be left behind and she was by no means unwilling to accept a handsome wage as Julia's abigail) were already aboard and Sir Michael was about to follow them, when he paused for a moment on the moist sand. Briefly he spoke with Mr. Lanton, who had come to bid polite "adieux," then, turning to the landlord of the "King's Head," Michael thrust half a dozen guineas into his plump hand. "There's enough and to spare in payment of my bill," said he, "so see to it that you supply some good liquor with which you may all drink to our happiness."

Some heard his words and thus, as he stepped into the boat and Harry pushed off, a rousing cheer rang out on the air.

It was mid-afternoon, and Harry Clayton's brig was already far out to sea, when Julia, refreshed with sleep, quitted the little cabin and mounted to the deck. There she found Michael. She looked very lovely as she stood before him, her head outlined against the blue; her cheeks were flushed rosy as dawn-clouds, her eyes shone steadfast and clear, her lips were parted like the

petals of a rose which guards pearls within its carnation bosom — so, at least, thought Michael!

For a while they were silent, then:

“And so the adventures are over,” said he, “the old life done with. No more wild rides, no more fears and tremors, no more escapades on the road — the great romantic road!”

She sighed.

“Julia, you regret it?”

“Maybe I should — but for you,” she answered smiling.

And so I will leave them; there on the gentle-swaying deck as the ship sped forward through the cerulean of the sea, above them the great white sails curving to the breeze, the wash of the waves crooning in their ears — the gulls crying around.

THE END

